

"The Widow of Nain"

Luke 7:11-17

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

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At our Session meeting this past week, we talked about what an especially hard time this has been, not just for our country, but for the WORLD. For the past nine months, this pandemic has created a cloud of stress, anxiety, and despair which seems to have descended and enveloped almost EVERYONE, and it is only INTENSIFYING with each passing week. We just surpassed the quarter million mark in deaths- that's 250,000 empty places around Thanksgiving tables this year who occupied those same seats LAST year; that's 250,000 fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters, grandparents and grandchildren, friends and loved ones who will NEVER AGAIN be present during the Christmas and Easter holidays, at birthday and other family celebrations- and it is a number that is accelerating at an exponential rate.

That sorrow is never HEAVIER than when death comes knocking to claim a beloved son or a daughter. Over the past twenty years, my sister has buried a husband and her four eldest children and she continues to remind me every time we talk how the pain never subsides, ESPECIALLY on their birthdays and at holiday time. During my first pastorate in Pennsylvania, we had a young couple whose first child was born without a brain- only a brain stem. As expected, the infant (whom they named "Terry") died within only a few hours after delivery. Despite having two other healthy children, that couple has carried the pain of their son's death to this day- regularly visiting Terry's grave and never forgetting to leave fresh flowers beside his head stone.

Our text this morning concerns a widow and her recently deceased son. They are SO insignificant that both remain anonymous. Furthermore, the setting in which our story takes place is SO obscure that this is the only reference to it in all the Bible. A small village about twenty-five miles south of Capernaum, Nain was situated against the slopes of a mountain called "Little Hermon." Today, Nain consists of only a few houses inhabited by a hundred persons or so, but ancient ruins in the area point to a time when it was a much larger and more active community.

According to our text, a funeral procession was underway within her walls. A pallet bearing a young man was being carried out of the town to the cemetery just on the outskirts. At the head of the procession was the boy's mother- a woman whom we are informed was a widow. Thus, right off the bat we learn that this mother has suffered a DOUBLE tragedy in her life- FIRST, that she had lost her husband- he who had been her lover and main means of support, and SECOND, that her one and ONLY son was now gone as well.

In the ancient world but ESPECIALLY in Jewish culture, there was no tragedy more devastating than the loss of a first-born son. Children then, as they do TODAY, embodied the hopes and dreams of their parents. Through them, the memories, values, and traditions of the family and of previous generations were passed on to the next. As they got older, they assisted

in the support of the family. They were expected to bless the familial line with grandchildren who would then carry on the family name. With the death of her husband and now her SON, her only child, her hopes and dreams and future security were gone so it could be said that with THEIR passing, something had died within HER as well.

As this funeral procession winds its way through the village towards the town's gate, the air is filled with the loud lamentations of friends and the cries of the mother. However, at the same time there that a procession is LEAVING it, there is another one ARRIVING- a loud and raucous parade wending its way in the direction of the town's entrance. At the head of THIS group was not a tearful widow but Jesus of Nazareth, leading his noisy band of followers and disciples. As they marched, the air was filled, not with weeping and wailing and inconsolable grief but with laughter and singing and joyful anticipation.

Twenty-four hours earlier, Jesus had been in Capernaum where he'd healed a beloved slave belonging to a Roman centurion, a commander of Caesar's army. Hearing that Jesus was a miracle worker of sorts and that he was in the area, this military leader sent some representatives to find him in the hopes he could save his servant, now on the brink of death. Responding at once to his urgent request, Jesus was not far from his house when he was met by another group of men sent by the centurion telling him he did not have to come to his home, that as a man of authority like himself, all our Lord had to do was SPEAK the word, and his slave would be healed. When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and announced that he had not seen such faith, not even in Israel! As a result of the man's faith, his servant WAS healed!

But how different were the circumstances NOW. Where the centurion was a man of great power and wealth and authority, this woman was a poor widow- a social non-entity. And where the centurion was declared==by CHRIST no less--to be a man of great FAITH, in THIS account, there was no faith involved. Nobody had sent word to Jesus about her and her son- it's doubtful whether this woman or anyone in Nain had even HEARD of Jesus, much less KNEW where to look for him. Yet, Jesus senses something about her and that's where this drama really starts. He begins a march, not to Jerusalem or any of the cities around Capernaum but out into the wilderness, in the direction of NOWHERE- to a small outpost which most likely his followers had never heard of or been themselves. Without knowing where Jesus was heading, the same multitude that had witnessed the healing of the centurion's slave now begins to follow their leader, wondering what new miracle or bit of magic he would perform NEXT.

The most significant detail in the whole story is one which most scholars and commentators often overlook- that the two processions meet at the city gate. It is a narrow entranceway which can allow only ONE of the two groups to pass through at a time- only one or the other can possibly have the right of way. Then, as now, funeral corteges have a special privilege. I have been in enough of them to know how the cars all line up behind the hearse with their headlights on. Then the police block off all the intersections and provide a personal escort through the community so that between the funeral parlor and the cemetery, there is no stopping- you have the right of way, even through all the stop signs and red lights.

Well, this act of courtesy was in effect in Jesus' day as well. By all rights, Jesus should have pulled over to the side of the road and allowed the funeral procession to proceed without

obstruction- but that's not what happens. At the gate of the city, the funeral is forced to a halt because of the large group of merry disciples blocking their exit out of the city. When Jesus' followers realize that their OWN path is impeded by this procession of mourners, they all stop, waiting to see what their leader will do. If he marches, they march; if he moves to the side, they will follow in kind.

What we have here is a Mexican standoff with the forces of grief, despair, and death on one side of the gate, and joy and hope and life on the other. More than a clash between two contrasting groups, it signifies a confrontation between two radically different attitudes. The question becomes, "Which one will win out?" When death meets life, when sorrow encounters joy, when despair confronts hope, which attitude will triumph and eventually govern one's outlook on life? That, in essence, is the drama being waged here at the entranceway to Nain.

Our text informs us what happens next: "And when the Lord saw her, he felt compassion for her, and said unto her, 'Weep not.'" Jesus apparently did not know this woman- he knew nothing of her name or family situation or status in the community. What he DID know, though, was her tears; he understood all too well her terrible deep pain, her utter despair and loss of hope. We witness here how Jesus' love is so wide, his concern so deep that NOTHING was going to keep him from this appointment.

My friends, the contrast between these two episodes- the one concerning the healing of the centurion's slave and the other, the funeral procession led by a widow in Nain, could not have been clearer. Within those twenty-four hours, Jesus had gone from responding to the pleas of a powerful and wealthy military ruler in one of Galilee's major cities, to attending to the tears of a poor and powerless widow in a rural town few had ever heard of. Where he had just witnessed such faith unlike any he had seen in all of Israel, the widow in question had seemingly evidenced LITTLE or NO faith to speak of. Yet, he sets out to walk a good twenty-five miles over hot dusty roads just to reach her and bind up her broken heart. If this is the case, then the implications of this story are great for US. What this means is that if Jesus is all-too willing to travel well out of his way to an obscure little village to dry the tears of an anonymous woman with no social status to speak of, then we can be assured that this same Jesus will demonstrate a similar concern for US. Jesus will come personally to such rural and seemingly insignificant parishes like Deer Creek and Pleasant Unity, to average and anonymous persons such as you and me to express compassion for US and to dry OUR tears. There is no man, no woman, no child too poor or too insignificant that Jesus can't or won't make his way to OUR home. He sees OUR tears, hears OUR cries, and feels OUR pain as if they were his own, saying to US, even as he said to that widow, "Do not weep. Do not weep."

But there's still a bit more to the story. The funeral cortege never did reach its intended destination; it never arrived at the cemetery where a hastily-prepared sepulcher had been waiting to receive the young boy's body. It didn't HAVE to because this journey of defeat and death had been interrupted by the forces of triumphal life. It says that our Lord went up to the pallet upon which the boy lay, touched his body and said, "Young man, I say unto thee, ARISE." And he DID! The son awoke from death as though it were nothing more than a deep sleep- Jesus has

just that kind of authority. Here we see that Jesus not only has the WILL to seek us out but he possesses the POWER to revive our hopes and restore to us our joy once again. This means that there is no tragedy so great, no despair so final that he can't find us and fill us with peace. This he promises to do and our lesson this morning confirms that fact!

When I was in seminary, I spent a year as the intern minister of a small Presbyterian church in Orick, California. Called "the Southern Gateway to the Redwood National Park," Orick was a tiny coastal community approximately 50 miles from the Oregon border. It was SO remote that I was the only seminary student even interested in applying for the job. Throughout that year, I became especially close to one of the church's members- Patsy Hufford, a woman who had a most interesting history. Patsy was a young war-bride from England who came to Orick with her husband following the end of the Second World War to settle down and raise a family. In the early 1970's, her husband developed cancer and died leaving her with her son and only child, Eric. A year later, Eric was driving down a curving road when he lost control of it, sliding headlong into a tree. Eric, only 18 years of age, was killed instantly. Of course this devastated Patsy. First her adoring husband is taken from her and then her only son, her child of promise and dreams.

Patsy had no one to take her frustration out on other than God. She became very bitter towards God, even quitting church where she had been so active over the years. She ceased reading her Bible and even refused to pray. In fact, she felt all reason for living was gone and wanted to die HERSELF. All attempts by friends and church members to draw her out of herself and back into the world were to no avail.

Yet, over the next few years, God was performing his OWN form of surgery upon her heart. Time DOESN'T always heal all wounds as the old saying goes but with God's help, he can make them bearable. There was an opening at the local school for a secretary to the principal. Little did she know that that job would in time help pull herself out of her private grief and back into the world. As school secretary, she learned to love those kids as though they were her own. She knew each child by name, often spending time with each one, helping to sort out their problems and needs which were quite considerable. As they moved on through the years, they would often return to the school just to say "hi" and tell her how much she had meant to them growing up. They became for her a kind of surrogate family so that through the loss of her own son, Eric, she had inherited a whole school of "sons" and "daughters" to care for. She confessed to me once that those children had come to mean everything in the world to her and that she wouldn't know what she'd do when it was time for her to retire. Returning to her church, she became one of the most active and vibrant Christian women I have ever met. Yes, her grief was deep, her pain was real, but God used her sufferings to expand her own heart to embrace HUNDREDS of young lives.

Every time I read this morning's scripture lesson, my thoughts return to Patsy Hufford- a modern-day Widow of Nain. You see, both mothers had been dealt the cruelest blow imaginable- the loss of their husbands soon followed by the loss of an only child. Both were persons of no account, living in small outposts that hardly appear on any maps. Yet both

women were expressly sought out by Jesus who knew MORE than their names and addresses- he saw their tears, he heard their cries, he knew their pain. In both cases, there was a dramatic encounter between death and life, between despair and hope, between fear and joy and in each instant, it was life and hope and joy that emerged victorious over the forces of death and despair and fear.

Friends, I assure you that if you pay close attention to the drama in this story, you TOO will hear the voice of one saying to YOU, "Do not weep. Do not weep." It is the voice of Jesus whose words ring as clear and true today as they did almost two thousand years ago. He seeks US out to dry OUR tears, to revive OUR hopes, and to restore OUR joy. And he not only has the URGENCY to seek us out but he ALSO has the POWER to raise us up from out of ourselves, to deliver us from crushed spirits and crippling attitudes whether they're feelings of guilt or feelings of grief, feelings of fear or feelings of regret, feelings of SELF-loathing or feelings of hatred towards OTHERS, feelings of loneliness or feelings of despair. Thus he commands US this morning, even as he did the lifeless corpse of that young son, to ARISE! "RISE UP," he says, "from out of your OWN graves and experience the NEW LIFE that can only come from our Heavenly Father. RISE UP and experience the LOVE that comes from knowing you are unconditionally accepted, how God could never love his only-begotten son Jesus any more than he personally loves you and me. RISE UP and experience the JOY that comes from knowing he declares you to be a brand new person, that your past has been wiped clean and is now gone forever from his sight. RISE UP and experience the PEACE of knowing that he knows your name and feels your pain even when nobody ELSE can, and how he wastes no time in attending to your deepest concerns. RISE UP and experience the HOPE that comes from knowing how nothing—NO NOTHING--can ever separate you from either his presence or his love- NOT EVEN DEATH! Therefore, I say unto you this morning ARISE! RISE UP and LIVE!" and may this new life begin with you NOW, this very day.