

***Proper 5C –Son’s Death, Widow’s Death***

*Luke 7:11-17 – 6/6/10 – St. John’s, Salisbury*

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Today’s reading from the Hebrew Scriptures about Elijah has an optional ending that you didn’t hear. In it the widow’s son dies, but by lying on top of him Elijah brings him back to life. So it and today’s gospel both deal with the issue of, not life and death, but death and life because in both readings someone who was dead is brought back to life. Now I’ve heard stories even in today’s world, of someone who, though clinically dead, is somehow revived. You’ve no doubt heard the descriptions given from time to time of someone seemingly hovering over an operating table, able to watch what is happening beneath, as the doctors frantically apply measures to revive that person. Especially in speaking about the story today that comes to us from Nain, one might naturally wonder, at least in our world, if perhaps that same phenomenon isn’t in play here – that is, that the son isn’t really dead, just near death. After all Jewish burial customs require the burial of someone as quickly as possible after death, the same day even unless that day is the Sabbath, on which, of course, in traditional Jewish practice, no work at all is to be accomplished. Since there’s no mention of it being the Sabbath in this case, however, one might, then, speculate that the widow’s son isn’t really dead. Maybe they’ve rushed the burial so much that he’s merely near death – in a coma, perhaps. People in the past have actually worried about precisely this issue. You may, for example, be familiar with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century development of various devices to prevent someone from being buried when they weren’t really dead – bells, tubes or cords that could be manipulated by the one interred if a mistake really had been made.

I suppose, in this age of skepticism, it’s no doubt to be expected for us to be at least somewhat suspicious that the young man in Nain was not truly dead at all. Even in the perhaps a bit shady world of the faith healers I’ve yet to hear any claims in our world today of actual resuscitations from death itself. But there are two things that distinguish these stories, both the Old Testament one and the one from the gospel, from the world of those faith healers. First, think of the story of the Transfiguration. Who was it that the disciples who went up the mountain with Jesus saw there standing by him? It was Moses and Elijah. When, on the road near Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked who people said that he was, the only specific names given were John the Baptist and Elijah. So Elijah is a very special person indeed, and at least in matters of this sort, truly to be linked in our minds with Jesus himself, just as the designers of the lectionary have done. Secondly, these stories are, after all, from our Scriptures. They are not merely factual recitations of events, as they might be if found in the pages of a newspaper. So let’s just accept for the purposes of these stories that the sons in each were really dead, for that they were is surely essential to the stories.

Let’s consider especially the story of the healing of the widow’s son as told by Luke. A good starting place for thinking about what we read in the Bible is to ask why a

story is there. What is it really all about? What is its meaning for **us** supposed to be? Well, although it appears to be about how Jesus restored the widow's son to life, most commentators are clear that the real subject of the story is the widow herself. Yes, the son has been restored to life, but he'll die again. Even Lazarus, Jesus' close friend, is brought back to life only to live out his normal life span. Only Jesus himself is actually resurrected; the others are resuscitated. They'll die eventually just as all of us will also eventually die.

A member of a church I spent time in while I was still living in California had a terrible stroke, which left her in a coma for a couple of months. During that time she now has a vivid memory of being on a porch peeking through a window into Heaven itself, but when she attempts to find the door and enter she is told that she can't enter – that she has to return to her previous life. It simply isn't yet time for Heaven. Her reaction? Disappointment. There have, of course, been residual physical problems because of the stroke, but she has been very productive. However, even though we can't attest to the accuracy of her report about the true nature of Heaven, we can sense her obvious disappointment at being told she has to return here. So in that sense at least, perhaps when Jesus revived the widow's son he wasn't doing him such a great favor.

However, what we do know, if we know anything about the nature of the world in which this all took place, is that bringing him back to life was doing the widow herself an enormous favor. In a real sense, the son's death was also hers. Think of what James says in his letter: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." Why is it that widows require such special care? To answer that question we have to ask what place women in general had in the 1<sup>st</sup>-century? Their position was primarily derived from their husbands. It was the husbands who had the responsibility of providing the economic security wives required. And a wife's closest bond was probably not even to her husband but, if she had one, to her son. So this woman is a loser on several counts. Her husband is dead, and therefore no longer able to care for her. And her son's death has now also deprived her of not one but two important supports in her life –since marriages in that world were more contract than loving relationship, there are no longer any real ties to her husband's family, and the one male figure who might now provide both emotional and physical support for her, her only son, is gone as well.

Where can she now turn? Here's a story from our own society, in which there are far more opportunities for women to work, even to thrive. I'll grant you in advance that it is clearly an apocryphal, not a factual story, and you can tell from the money figure mentioned in it that it is from a few years ago, but, even so, it gives us insight into the dangers faced by one without a strong web of support.

Consider the man (the story goes) who went to see the pastor of an inner-city church. Though the pastor was used to the conditions of poverty and want surrounding his parish, he was touched by the story

this man told him. The man described the needs of a poor widow. She has four hungry children to feed, is confined to her bed with no money for a doctor, and she owes three months rent and is about to be evicted from her apartment. The man then explained that he was trying to help raise the needed rent money, \$600. Digging into his own wallet while racking his brains for other solutions, the pastor applauded the man's concern and commitment. "Of course I'll help," he said, "If you can give your time to this cause, so can I. By the way, how do you know this woman?" Well, replied the man, "I'm the landlord."

Holy Simon Legree! But it's for such widows as these that the gospels were written. Yes, Jesus is someone different from us mere mortals in more than degree. Yes, the story shows his compassion and what that compassion can lead him to accomplish on behalf of one in need. This is, after all, the same Jesus who, from his compassion, raised his friend, Lazarus from the dead after expressing his feelings about that death in the Bible verse that has become the answer to a trivia question, namely "What is the shortest verse in the Bible?" The answer being: "Jesus wept."

But we are, after all, now his only way of continuing to act here on earth; so it is **our** compassion, not **his**, that will determine the fate of those in our own society who have the misfortune of having the same lack of status and opportunity as the widow in Nain. Since this story comes to us during the season after Pentecost, it surely serves as a reminder of the fact that the compassion that can drive us to help rather than to exploit those in our own society like this widow comes to us through God's Holy Spirit, which Jesus had promised his disciples to send, and which arrived on Pentecost. So if ever the question arises in your mind as to how to treat folks like the widow, surely that's the occasion to ask, in the words of the catch phrase of a few years ago, what Jesus would do.

*In his name, AMEN*