

A Comforting Touch

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Luke 7:11-17; I Kings 17:8-24

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In today's story from Luke's gospel, a tremendous amount is said without a word being spoken. There in Galilee on a dirt road leading into the city of Nain, Jesus, his disciples and a crowd of followers made their way toward the city gate. On that same road by the same city gate, a widow racked with grief walked slowly in a crowd of people in a funeral procession, accompanying her only son to his final resting place. The two parades converged – two crowds of people came together and yet the dominant mood is one of utter aloneness. A widow alone in her grief, moving beside a dead son, likely causing Jesus' group to step aside and watch in silence. The somber mood and perceived bad karma of being near someone who's died filled the air. The ritual uncleanness of a corpse caused all to keep their distance. There were no songs of joy, no chatter of conversations – only the noise of sandals shuffling down a dirt road and the sobs of mourners broke the silence that day.

Despite being surrounded by mourners, the widow of Nain was terribly alone. No husband and now no child. The ones who would protect and provide for her were gone. In those days it was the custom to bury people very soon after their death, if possible even before sundown that same day. So the widow was still in shock. Her grief was fresh and raw. Scores of people in two distinct groups saw her and kept their distance. One did not. Vs. 13 – “And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’” Unlike other healing miracles in the bible, this woman did not seek out Jesus. She was not like the Syro-Phoenician woman who threw herself at Jesus' feet, begging that he cast the demon out of her daughter (Mark 7). She was not like the centurion in the story that precedes this one who sent emissaries to Jesus begging that he come to heal a beloved slave. She might well have never even heard of Jesus; she likely never raised her grief-stricken gaze long enough to make contact with him or ask for his help. Across the great divide that separated the two crowds that day on the dusty streets of Nain, Jesus made the first move. Jesus spoke, came forward and touched the funeral bed, even though to do so was to be considered ritually unclean according to the laws of Moses. Jesus, moved by compassion, chose to act, to connect with another in need, and to offer true comfort, shattering the stigma of isolation and changing that woman's world forever.

A tremendous amount is said in this story without saying it explicitly. In the verses after this story, disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus and asked, “Are you he who is to come or shall we look for another?” Was Jesus truly the long-awaited Messiah, or perhaps was he the prophet Elijah re-born, the one who prepares the way for the Messiah? Jesus answered them this way: *Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are*

raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. Luke has offered examples of each one of those categories, culminating here in the raising of the widow's son. But even in working through the Messiah "checklist," Luke has collected the stories that best call to mind the examples found in the Hebrew scripture and were well-known to his readers. Without saying so explicitly, this story points back to the earlier story of Elijah who raised another widow's son long before.

We're told in I Kings 17 that a drought afflicted the land of Israel. This was ironic, since the fickle kings of Israel were now worshipers of the false god, Baal, the god of rain and rich harvests. Elijah told King Ahab how the Lord God brought the drought upon them, causing Elijah to have to go into hiding. Elijah was sent to Zarephath, a city near the Mediterranean coast in the region just beyond the borders of the kingdom of Israel. A dusty place just outside the city walls, as it were, of the Promised Land. There near the literal city gates of Zarephath, Elijah was directed to a widow gathering sticks and twigs as firewood. A widow utterly alone although in a busy city. A widow with only one son. A widow walking in the valley of the shadow of death, for in her own words, she was preparing to cook a final morsel of bread for herself and her son before they died. She did not seek out Elijah's help. She did not seek out anyone's assistance. She was utterly alone, heavy of heart, until the servant of God reached out to her with compassion and hope.

Before I accepted my previous church call, I lived in Kansas City and volunteered as an emergency room chaplain at one of the downtown hospitals. Chaplaincy is hard work and a special calling. Like television hospital shows, they are often places of crisis and quick responses after car wrecks or street violence. But emergency rooms are also places of waiting around – waiting for test results to come back, waiting for specialists to offer opinions, waiting for rooms in the hospital wards to become available. Almost never did a drama move from its onset through its completion during one of my eight-hour shifts – and certainly never quickly enough to fit into a one-hour episode of ER. One evening a young man was brought in who'd been in a car wreck. Relatively soon thereafter, after his family had been notified, we got word that two more family members had just been admitted in serious condition, who'd had a car wreck of their own rushing to the hospital. I spent a lot of time shuttling between rooms that night.

In fact, as a chaplain, my most important role was related to my ability to pass through the barriers confronting the family. While they were in a waiting room, I could enter the E.R. While they sat in a side room in the E.R., I could pass through the curtain of their cubicle and get information from the main desk or from attending doctors and nurses. I could bring them something to eat or drink. To the best of my ability I brought them updated information and words of comfort and prayer. In their shock and grief, as a chaplain my role was to keep them company and remind them they were not alone.

A lot was said in the story in Luke 7 without a literal word ever being spoken: A lot about loneliness in the midst of crowds, of being an outsider, of being set apart by grief while in the presence of death, being captive to a despair that can become a living, spiritual death. But then Jesus broke the social barriers with a touch and broke the barrier of

silence with a few words. To the widow, he said, “Do not weep.” He is not chastising her for her tears. There is already enough pressure in today’s world to hide our emotions and not to cry, as if to do so means we are people of weak faith or over-sensitive spirits. A better translation of what Jesus said to the woman would be, “Do not continue to weep.” He names her tears and her loss, but Jesus also knew there was good cause for drying her eyes.

Jesus went directly to the funeral pallet and said, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” We’ve seen how this story echoes the stories of the Old Testament, especially the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath: Echoing Elijah’s presence that shattered the widow’s pre-death solitude; echoing the miracle of Elijah so that when that widow’s son was struck down, Elijah touched him, lay upon him three times, and restored him to life. And then scripture says Elijah took the child and delivered him to his mother.

In the same way, once Jesus said the word “Arise,” it echoed the other times he spoke that word in the recorded gospels: When the paralyzed man was lowered through a hole in the roof and Jesus said, “Your sins are forgiven; arise and walk.” (Luke 5) When the deceased daughter of Jairus is brought to Jesus and he said to her, “Child, arise” and she was restored to her parents (Luke 8). When Jesus stood in front of Lazarus’ tomb and shouted, “Lazarus, come out” and he was restored to his family (John 11).

Like a chaplain of the soul, in life Jesus took the initiative to move between those places we keep apart – to step into the midst of the grief of a funeral procession and then by a touch and a word to bring what was most longed for.

Like a chaplain of the soul, even within the shadow of his own death, Jesus moved in those places that keep us apart – rending the curtain in the temple so that we might have full access to the eternal God, caring for his own mother when he said from the cross to the Beloved Disciple, “Behold your mother; woman, behold your son”; and when he said the words that restore each one of us, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

Like a chaplain and savior of the soul, as the resurrected Lord, Jesus moved between those places this world believes must stay apart – stepping out of the tomb as the first fruits of the promised resurrection for us all, the one who himself arose from his own funeral pallet, that we might know true hope and walk in the eternal promise of full restoration and peace.

As followers of Christ, we will meet many people while journeying down the roads of this life. We are to cross the barriers that divide us. We are to use our words and our comforting touch to bring healing and hope to those who feel utterly alone and forsaken. We too are to say, “Do not continue to weep. Arise! Arise from loneliness into community. Arise from despair into hope. Arise from death to life.” Such is the example of Christ for us today. Such is the good news for us today.

AMEN

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