

**Third Sunday after Pentecost  
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish  
Saint Francisville, LA  
6 June 2016**

**Luke 7:11-17**

In today's story Jesus does the unthinkable: He stops a funeral procession as it is approaching its destination. Imagine if this were to happen today. As we process down Ferdinand Street on our way to Port Hudson, some street preacher and a group of his followers block the way stopping the limousines, the line of vehicles with lights on, and perhaps even a few motorcycles on their tracks. This would be a dramatic scene. Of course in the Gospel of Luke we are not talking about a modern-day scene but a village scene: people on foot, walking behind the widowed mother, who herself is following the professional mourners with their cymbals, flutes and high-pitched shrieking and wailing. The scene is different, but the villagers would have been as shocked as we would be at someone stopping a funeral procession.

Luke tells us that this Palestinian village scene takes place in Nain, just a short distance from Nazareth and about 25 miles from Capernaum, where Jesus just healed the Centurion's slave. Several pallbearers are carrying the body of a young man who was the only son of a local widow. This detail adds an extra level of drama to the scene and ties it directly to the stories of Elijah and Elisha in the Old Testament. As the only son of a widowed mother, the young man would have been expected to care for his mother in her old age. By losing this boy we may assume that the woman is losing all sources of protection and care. The body is carried most likely in a wicker basket, covered with a sheet. Someone else would have been bringing the spices and aloes for the preparation of the body, before it was to be wrapped and placed in its final resting place. Embalming was not practiced in Israel at this time in history.

Another element of drama is the coming together of two "crowds". We know that Jesus was followed by a crowd from Capernaum and we know that there was a crowd of villagers following the grieving mother and pallbearers. Jesus halted his own march after a long day's walk, when disciples and followers alike would have wanted to finally get into the city and get some rest. Both crowds are startled by his behavior: (a) He is a Rabbi and, as a good Jew, he is not allowed to touch the bier, let alone the body of a dead person. This would have rendered him ceremonially impure and would have prevented him from entering the temple for at least 7 days. (b) The halting of a funeral procession is highly disrespectful in an honor-and-shame bound culture. (c) Performing such a public act would certainly get him the kind of notoriety with the authorities that the disciples feared. (d) Speaking to a woman in public was not a common practice in first-century Palestine for a righteous Jew. Just to mention a few reasons.

Jesus tells the woman, "Do not weep." Then Jesus reached out, touched the bier and possibly the body, and the procession halted. Jesus said to the young man, "Young man, I say to you, arise." To those gathered around, both those who followed him and

the villagers in the funeral procession, Jesus' behaviors and words would have felt vaguely familiar. They would have remembered the stories of Elijah and Elisha. Using the same words used in those two other resurrection accounts, "He gave him back to his mother." The crowds exclaimed, "A great prophet has risen among us!"

Jesus broke into the scene and interrupted natural law. He altered the status quo, giving life to one who was dead. Of course we know that Jesus didn't raise everybody physically from the dead and he didn't heal everybody. But, by raising this particular boy from the dead, Jesus turned a hopeless situation into an experience of joy, hope, and love. Can you imagine the boy's reaction after seeing his mother again? Can you imagine their first conversation? What do you think that first meal together was like? This is an extraordinary event in the life of this family and in the life of those who witnessed this great miracle.

This story can be applied spiritually to our lives today as well. We may ask ourselves if there are any other forms of death than physical death. Is death only a material reality or can death be an emotional and spiritual reality as well? Have you ever felt as though there is no purpose to your life, no meaning, no ultimate direction towards which you are walking? Have you ever felt dried up. You have given so much and for so long that now you feel as though you have nothing left to give? Have you ever felt tired of trying to change someone and now you feel hopelessly aware that your efforts have meant nothing to that person? Have you ever felt so overwhelmed with anger and bitterness that there is no joy left in your life? Have you ever felt so anxious and fearful that there is no peace and no rest in your life? My friends, I believe that there are many kinds of deaths and I believe that many of us experience these deaths daily in our lives. For many of us this is our story, this is our status quo, this is our daily funeral march. We wake up in the morning overwhelmed with anxiety or bitterness; find ways to distract ourselves during the day, while still experiencing the same bitterness and anxiety just beneath the surface; and then go to bed feeling as overwhelmed as we felt when we woke up. And then we repeat the cycle all over again the next day.

In many ways, Walker Percy, the man whose memory and works we have celebrated this weekend, diagnosed this problem for us in his book *Lancelot*. This incredibly critical and dark monologue describes the degradation the author saw most people embracing in the 1970's. The main character, Lancelot, a former lawyer locked in a psychiatric hospital after killing his wife, describes to his friend Percival, a psychiatrist-priest (or perhaps a priest-psychiatrist) his anger and disillusion with the world. As he sees it, many have looked for the meaning of life in virtue and in living virtuous lives, but this has failed. Virtue doesn't really exist, all that exists are selfish motives and ambition. Others have tried to find meaning in sin, as the opposite of virtue, but Lancelot is disgusted by [the tawdriness of tepid sin](#) that hardly deserves the name. For him it is by passing through, participating in, and embracing real and pure evil that some sort of meaning might be found. He describes in a long monologue to his silent listener, Percival, the process through which he came to the conclusion that pure evil is the answer, and how this realization led him to kill his wife. He calls this the discovery of the "Unholy Grail." Those who have read King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table,

know that Lancelot and Percival discover the Holy Grail and this discovery saves their world. Our Lancelot believes that pure evil might be the answer to the lack of meaning and purpose of his generation. After listening for the entire book without saying a word, Percival speaks on the last line of the book. Lancelot asks Percival, "Do you have anything to say?" Percival responds, "Yes". And the book ends here.

I believe that Percival's "Yes" is the good news for us today. There is a third way. If human virtue has failed to give us meaning, and if evil has also failed to give us meaning (after all, Lancelot is crazy and in prison), perhaps Percival's "Yes" points to a third way: The Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus enters our story every day and interrupts our status quo. Our fruitless attempts to control everything and everyone. Our misguided efforts to save ourselves. Our own propensity for evil and selfishness. He knows the anguish of loss. He knows the pain of absence. He knows what it feels like to be used and betrayed. He empathizes with our human condition and he shows us the way to the Father. Not even death (physical or spiritual) can separate us from God in Christ. Death, which seems so final and so irrevocable, is interrupted today out of love and compassion for a powerless and defenseless widow. And if Christ was powerful to do this then, we must believe that he is powerful to break into our lives today. As Christians, the biggest charge any one can levy against us is not that we don't love Christ, but rather, that we don't believe in his power. We believe Jesus will save us and bring us to heaven some day, but, as for today's troubles, we don't believe he has the power to help us or we secretly believe he doesn't care.

This poor widow didn't ask for this miracle, there is no record of her worthiness or merit, there is no background story of her righteousness or her status in the community. She was an anonymous woman with a broken heart and Jesus took the initiative, not because she deserved his mercy, but because he loved her and cared for her. It is likewise with us. Most of us are not meritorious people. We cannot look at Jesus in the eye and say, "You must act in our lives. We deserve this from you!" The good news today is that Jesus does not act out of merit. He does not check our balance of good deeds versus sins and then decides to act. He is moved by overwhelming compassion, out of love for us, God's children.

I pray that today will be the day you place your life into his care. He is, even today, strong and mighty to raise us up from our spiritual and emotional death! He is even today in love with humanity and seeks to give us the meaning we all crave. Let him stop your status quo. Let him break into your life. Let him resurrect you from the ashes of your discouragement, your pain, your fear, your bitterness, and your anxiety. Let him inject new life into you. Only he can do this, trust in him and he will see you through! Amen.