

Sermon: We Have a Compassionate Lord

Text: Luke 7:11-17

Gary L. Wackler

August 16, 2009

Luke 7:11-17 (NIV) ¹¹Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. ¹²As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. ¹³When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.” ¹⁴Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” ¹⁵The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. ¹⁶They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.” ¹⁷This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.

Introduction: This story is only found in Luke’s gospel. Luke is a physician by occupation (**Col. 4:14**). In the previous story in Luke’s gospel we see Jesus heal the centurion’s servant who was near death. In our story today Jesus raises the dead. I know some of you have had the awful and life-changing experience of the death of a spouse. Some of you also have had to bury your own children. Both of these events are bad enough separately; but when they both occur to the same person, there is a tremendous need for compassion. The Greek word that is translated “heart went out to” is a deeply intense word that deals with visceral feelings. Throughout the New Testament when Jesus is moved in this way emotionally, i.e., showing compassion, it happens before a miracle.

In our story in Luke we can read where:

I. Jesus Saw Cause for Compassion (vv. 11-12).

A. He wanted to increase faith.

It was maybe the next day that Jesus traveled from Capernaum where he had healed the centurion’s son to the town of Nain. Most agree that Nain’s location may not be sure geographically, but some think it might be about twenty to twenty-five miles away. It would have taken most of the day travelling. The text says there was a large crowd. It seems to me that Jesus would have taken this opportunity to talk about what had happened in Capernaum and teach lessons as he went.

Jesus saw another opportunity coming to increase his follower's faith. That was really the reason for the miracles. He gave them signs as to who he really was! Even though the town was obscure and only mentioned here in Scripture, Jesus must have had a definite plan to visit *this* village in southern Galilee whose name meant "pleasant." I am also sure that Jesus' timing (as always) was perfect. Probably late afternoon, Jesus approaches the town gate and sees another opportunity to teach others about who he is. His followers had seen a person near-death brought back to wholeness. This day he would bring back someone from the dead to increase their faith and demonstrate compassion.

For others:

B. He wanted to establish faith.

The text is clear here. We have a woman who had lost her husband, and now she had also lost her only son. Two crowds were coming together: one joyous and expectant (what would Jesus do next?), and the other quite sad, full of despair and hopeless.

My parents had a child die, my brother, Jeff, at 35. My brother, Randy, lost conjoined twins - Valerie during the operation to separate them, and Natalie, about eleven years later. Another brother, John, and his wife Diana had an infant of just a few months die, named Brian.

The death of a child seems to go against nature. "In Carl Jung's words, 'it is the period placed before the end of the sentence,' sometimes when the sentence has hardly begun. We expect the old to die. The separation is always difficult, but it comes as no surprise. But (what of) the child, the youth? Life lies ahead, with its beauty, its wonder, its potential. Death is a cruel thief when it strikes down the young. The suffering that usually precedes death is another reason childhood death is so hard for parents to bear. Children were made for fun and laughter, for sunshine, not pain..... In a way that is different from any other relationship, a child is bone of his parent's bone, flesh of their flesh. When a child dies, part of the parents is buried....I met a man who was in his seventies. During our first ten minutes together, he brought the faded photograph of a child out of his wallet - his child, who had died almost fifty years before." [R. Kent Hughes]

For this widow in our story, both of her providers and protectors were now gone. She found herself, probably the very same day as her son's death, walking in front of the casket (bier, KJV) leading the procession. In our culture the minister would normally lead the procession to the place of burial.

The reason for this mother's prominent position was given in Midrash. It was because, they said, "women had introduced death into the world" - Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Vol. 1, p. 555). If the woman did not feel badly enough over the loss of her son, she would have also carried the guilt of her gender's original sin in Eden being the cause of his death.

What is called a *casket* in the NIV was likely a wicker pallet upon which the linen-wrapped body of her son was placed. The boy's face was uncovered for all to see.

The procession was joined by family and friends and even passerbys who wanted to show their final respect and sympathy. There were professional pipers and wailers (Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, p. 228) in the group. It is then that the two large, divergent crowds meet. It is then that the lesson begins.

It is here Jesus stops everything by touching the casket, and it is also when:

II. Jesus Demonstrated Compassion (vv. 13-15).

Jesus knew that by touching the funeral bier he would be unclean for a week (**Numbers 19:11**). He also knew that very soon this would not be an issue because the boy would be alive. This act of compassion, though, begins by stopping the funeral procession, and giving a clear commanding word:

A. To the widow.

Jesus says: "Don't cry." Literally Jesus was saying: "stop crying."

In the Jewish way of thinking: losing one's only son was looked at as a divine punishment for sin. How ironic that Jesus is found forsaken on a Roman cross later for the sins of the world.

Zechariah 12:10 (NIV) ¹⁰"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.

There are so many things people say at funerals that they shouldn't:

1. Time will heal
2. Life will go on
3. There is always someone else who is worse off.
4. God needs him more than you do.

No one should ever tell a grieving person to stop crying. We tell people this many times because their grief makes us uncomfortable. We may see similar events coming in our lives. Jesus tells the woman not to continue crying because it is unnecessary.

She has not lost her only son. Let me say this, though: people *need* to cry at funerals. It is an appropriate emotion even for Christians, and has nothing to do with a lack of faith in God.

Jesus tells the woman not to continue crying because her reality was soon to change. Jesus' heart went out to the woman, just like his heart would go out, showing compassion, to Jairus' whose daughter He would raise, and as Jesus would later come to Lazarus' tomb. John sees that miracle as a clear sign and records Jesus saying to Martha (Lazarus' sister):

John 11:25-26 (NIV) ²⁵“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Back to our story, Jesus then moves past the once-grieving mother

B. To the widow's son.

“Get up,” He says; “Arise” (KJV)! This is resurrection talk from the Author of Life. You ever talk to someone who was dead? I don't mean in a Ghost Whisperer kind of way, but just a monologue. There's nothing wrong with that, but admittedly it is not a dialogue. When Jesus speaks, his words bring life and they fulfill his will. Listen to the prophet Isaiah here:

Isaiah 55:10-11 (NIV) ¹⁰ As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, ¹¹so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

This is not someone noticing a movement of the chest up and down or feeling a pulse of someone merely thought to be dead. The text says: “the dead man sat up.” The Greek word (ἀνακαθίζω) translated “sat up” was “used by medical writers to describe patients sitting up in bed.” - Rienecker, p. 158

Once up, the boy begins to talk, but Luke does not tell us what he says. Later I am sure there must have been thanks and praise given to the Great Physician.

Luke, a doctor himself, tells us: Jesus gave the boy back to his mother. They both would benefit from this second chance with each other. The 7-day, 30-day, and annual anniversaries of the son's death that would have been observed would now be happy reminders of when they both met Jesus.

Even though it does not say they became followers of Jesus as a result of this day:
III. Jesus Is Recognized for His Compassion (vv. 16-17).

A. The town people praise God!

This, of course, would include the mother and son who were now reunited in life! It says they were filled with awe (NIV) or fear (KJV). This is worship language. This is people in the presence of God talk. Luke makes sure we hear him call Jesus, Lord! Jesus came to not only show us the Father, but to help us worship Him.

B. They begin to express faith.

We all crawl and walk spiritually before we can run. The town people vocalized two things specifically. Firstly they said:

“A great prophet has appeared among us.” This was the initial understanding.

Any good Jew believed the stories from their own Scriptures that told of Elijah (a man who did not die) who raised the son of a widow from Zarephath (**I Kings 17:17-24**), and also Elisha who raised, from the dead, the son of a Shunammite woman (**II Kings 4:18-37**). The town’s people believed that God could still use a prophet in this way.

We can only hope, that just like the Samaritan woman at the well, the people’s faith grew. The Samaritan woman went from recognizing Jesus as a man, to a prophet, to Messiah (Savior).

And secondly they recognized: “God has come to help his people.” Literally he had paid them a visit much like what John the Baptist’s father declares in the opening chapter of his gospel:

Luke 1:67-68 (NIV) ⁶⁷His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: ⁶⁸“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.

“God’s visitation may be in wrath (**Ex. 20:5**) or in mercy (**Ps. 106:4**), but for Luke it is always an act of grace. In **19:41-44** Jesus will predict the destruction of Jerusalem but not as a divine visitation. On the contrary, the destruction comes because the city ‘did not know the time of your visitation.’” - Craddock, *Luke*, p. 97

I hope you recognize Jesus for who he is. He is God, and He wants to bring you life!

Many times today we will even say of someone’s health: “it is in God’s hands.” That is not giving in to the inevitable, but placing our faith in the only One who has power and authority over life and death.

Of course, saying: “God has come to help his people.” was more true than the people realized. But because they were thankful:

C. They spread the word.

Any thankful people ought to speak of their benefactor to others. Like Luke’s story of the prodigal son, we were dead and now we are alive; we were lost, and now we are found. If we had a doctor who saved our life from sure death, wouldn’t we recommend him to others? And in light of a final day in human history shouldn’t we tell others and encourage the brethren?

I Thessalonians 4:16-18 (NIV) ¹⁶For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸Therefore encourage each other with these words.

Conclusion: One person has called this section of Scripture “a meeting at the gate.” Jesus still speaks to the dead today! There is a real sense that before we knew Jesus we were on *our* way to Death. All of us are on our way to the cemetery. But because Jesus speaks his words of life to us, we can turn back in worship, recognizing he is God, and tell others what He alone offers: *true* life.

John 5:21-25 (NIV) ²¹For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. ²²Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, ²³that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him. ²⁴“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. ²⁵I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

This early skirmish with Death would show Jesus’ compassion and also his power over Death. Later, Jesus will be sacrificed “outside the city gate” for us (**Hebrews 13:11-14**). In this final test, Death was defeated, providing for us all - the possibility of eternal life in heaven, if we will only place our faith in Jesus.

I John 5:11-12 (NIV) ¹¹And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹²He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

What is your relationship with Jesus this morning?