

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday after the Pentecost

Text: Luke 7:11-17

And when the Lord saw her,
He felt compassion for her,
and said to her, "Do not
weep."



Useless Weeping

The two easiest emotions for almost every person are sorrow and anger. We can get angry at another person - or group of people - at the drop of a hat. That is, in part, why we see so many losing control and doing horrible things to other people on the news. Anger is easy, and it is contagious. You see that contagious-ness in riots. People often do not know why the riot started, but they share the anger.

Sorrow is another easy to come by emotion. It is can consume a person just like anger can consume a person, but the difference between anger and sorrow is that anger is directed outward, usually, and strikes at others, while sorrow is inward directed and the sorrowful person usually strikes at themselves in their sorrow. It seems too much to bear. I would guess that most of us have known of someone who was consumed by their sorrow and could not escape it.

Our Gospel shows us an encounter between Jesus and a woman who was filled with sorrow. She had a good reason for her grief, her only son had just died, and she was a widow, which, in those days in particular, compounded the reasons for her sorrow. And Jesus stepped up to the grieving woman and said simply, "Do not weep." I invite you to look at this simple scene with me, and the miracle that Jesus performed under the theme, Do Not Weep.

The story itself is amazing, and you could get lost in the details, and forget the underlying message. Here was a woman who had already lost her husband. Her son was now her only support. Suddenly, he is gone as well. I know that it is suddenly, because the Jews buried their dead on the same day they died, unless they died quite late in the day - and then they would be buried on the next morning. This woman was devastated. Her only child was dead. The true depth of her sorrow, and the troubles that it was bringing to her might be measured in the crowd of mourners - "a sizeable crowd was with her", according to Luke. Although it was not their sorrow, they could share it a little.

Now, I have heard that in that culture you were obligated to join the funeral procession, if you were aware of it. We see echoes of that cultural expectation in the funerals in the Middle East on TV - they always seem to be huge crowds, large parades. Among the Jews in particular, it was an affront to the Creator for anyone to ignore a funeral, and pretend that the sorrow of death did not touch them - because death will finally touch everyone, and death is part of life. They believed, rightly I think, that one ought always to recognize and honor life, even - perhaps especially - when it has been extinguished.

In the Gospel, Jesus is approaching Na'in from Capernaum

with a large crowd following Him. That means that this miracle was no small, private affair. It was well witnessed and well-attested to. When Jesus surveys the scene, he felt compassion. I am sure that the meeting appeared to be pure chance - and I am just as certain that God timed all things that this meeting would happen just as it did. And it happened not just to show us the power of Jesus, or that He could do it, but to show us the compassion of Jesus.

He could have ignored it - or joined in with the crowd to wail and mourn at the visitation of death and all the attendant sorrows and troubles it brings. After all, death was nothing unusual even back then. In fact, death was more public, and less postpone-able than it is now. And when somebody died, they were taken home and cleaned up and wrapped up and buried that same day - there was no mortuary to hide the reality of death for a time, and no dressing the body up and putting on make-up so that the dead appeared merely to be sleeping. But Jesus did not ignore death, this time. He also did not simply go along with the crowd. Perhaps this funeral reminded Him of His own coming death, and His mother's approaching sorrow. Whatever was going on in the mind of Jesus, He stopped the procession and told the mother, "Do not weep".

Then He healed the man, that is, He made him to be alive again, and gave him back to his mother, to the joy and wonder and fear of everyone there. Life conquered death. Jesus spoke to the dead man as if he were merely asleep, and the man heard Him and awakened from death itself. Of course, he had to die again, one day, but that is another story for another day, and it is a part of this story that the Bible does not take time to tell us. What is striking - aside from raising the dead, of course - is the compassion of Jesus. Although this raising of the dead happened only

occasionally in the ministry of Jesus, He has that same compassion towards us all.

"He died for all", the Bible tells us, and "God so loved the world" - not just certain persons in it - "that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." He saw our need in sin and He healed us, raising us from the dead, so to speak, since we would have died eternal death in hell without Him. And, through His Word, He has called us to life eternal and made us heirs of glory with Him, just as He raised the son of the widow of Na'in with His Word on that day.

Our Gospel lesson this morning doesn't just say Jesus has the power to raise us from the grave - although it does make that point powerfully - it shows us the compassion of Jesus. The message speaks to each of us in our times of pain and sorrow, saying, "Do Not Weep". It teaches us about the caring of our Lord - something we often forget to think about because life has rough edges and sharp corners and we have to deal with pain, and tragedy, and terrorism, and hurricanes, and what all. But God would, by the words of our Gospel lesson, teach us about the compassion which moves Him, so that, in the words of our Epistle Lesson today, "so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God."

The Greek word in our Gospel translated, "felt compassion", means "moved in his guts" or "felt it in his viscera". It means that this was not some abstract, academic notion, but the same sort of compassion you feel when you turn on the

Television and see the destruction of Oklahoma or St. Louis area this past weeks, or watch the flooding in so many places, or witness the people who have had their homes, and all of their possessions, burned up in the fires in California and the southwest in the last few months. Jesus knows how we feel. Better yet, He knows how we should feel. He understands how loss and grief and sorrow feels. He understands the hurts and the fears. He doesn't fear the way we do. He never did, because He was never without hope - and He had the certainty of the good will of God for us, and for Himself. But He knows - and He understands fear and pain from a very personal standpoint. He can feel it right along with us - that is what compassion means; to feel along with. And His message, through our Gospel lesson this morning, is Do Not Weep.

In all of our troubles, He is there. He knows our pain and He is watching over us. He takes no pleasure in our pains and suffering - which is why He died for us, to spare us the greatest suffering of all. He was under no obligation to stop and care for the pains of this widow woman. Surely there were thousands of other opportunities to do just the same in the lives of others, where He did not. But for this one He acted to assuage her pain and meet her needs. He did it for her, but he did it also to remind us that He can, and that He has compassion on us all.

You know that you stand in a special relationship with Him, by virtue of your Baptism, and His choosing of you to be His children. That choice comes with certain troubles connected to it, guaranteed. But it also comes with His compassion guaranteed. The troubles come because the world hates Christ, and we show the world Christ shining through us in His Word and in His worship and in His working through us. When we face these troubles, we have the promise of God

that He is with us every step of the way to strengthen us and that we shall not have to bear more than we are able to endure.

Jesus has also given us His Word and the fellowship of the saints, and the powerful gift of the Holy Supper to help us and strengthen us and encourage us. When we partake of the Holy Supper, we receive Christ's true body and blood, and with that forgiveness and strengthening and His presence in us and with us to make us equal to the work which He gives us to do, and whatever cross which He calls us to carry in His name.

That doesn't mean that pain will not hurt, or that we will not be genuinely challenged by the cross which we must bear. It would not be a cross if it did not bring pain and hardship. But Jesus bids us "Do Not Weep". When He bid the woman not to weep, He was not merely wishing something and giving her nothing else, but He had a plan and took action to alleviate her sorrow. He has a plan for us as well. He has promised us that He will not give us more than we can endure - and everything we must endure is stamped with His purpose. We may not see the purpose, or the increase that results from our cross and our work. We are never promised that we will understand it all, or even finally see how what we did and what we endured worked out His holy will. We are only promised that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. Our work is faithfulness. What we do and how it accomplishes the will of God is His work.

But in the hour of trouble, or pain, or sorrow, we can find great comfort in knowing that Jesus has compassion for us just as He had compassion for that woman in her sorrow and deep need, so long ago. He acted, miraculously, to help her

and comfort her - and He will act on our behalf and for our comfort and blessing as well. He has acted, in redeeming us, and He continues to act through Word and Sacrament for our comfort and strengthening. And He will act in our lives and in our needs - by means of our brothers and sisters in the faith, and, sometimes, by means we may not imagine, and many not recognize as His acting until much later.

But of good cheer. In every situation, we may trust that our God knows our sorrow and knows our needs and is working our good and our blessing - and, as with the woman in our Gospel, Jesus bids us, Do Not Weep.