***MOTHERS AND SONS***

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Texts: 1 Kings 17:17-24 and Luke 7:11-17

There is a story told of a man who was playing golf one day when a funeral procession happened to pass by. The golfer stopped, removed his hat, and bowed his head until the whole procession had passed. His golfing partner was deeply impressed by this reverent action and remarked, “I didn’t know you were so respectful of the dead.” “Well,” the reverent golfer said, “I felt it was the least I could do after being married to her for the last 40 years.”

Now I know that all of you have greater respect for the dead than that golfer. We honor our loved ones with more than a bowed head and a momentary break in our golf games. We observe rituals at the time of death that reflect our love for the one who died, our support for the family, and our hope in the resurrection to come. Different places have different rituals. In the book, *Being Dead Is No Excuse: The Official Southern Ladies Guide to Hosting the Perfect Funeral,* Gayden Metcalfe and Charlotte Hays note:

*We’re people with a strong sense of community, and being dead is no impediment to belonging to it. We won’t forget you just because you’ve up and died. We may even like you better and visit you more often…*[[1]](#endnote-1)

So family and friends gather together to remember those who have died, to share memories, offer support to the family, and observe sacred rituals to mark the death of a loved one. Families stand together in our Memorial Garden to inter a loved one’s ashes with prayer. In New Orleans there may be a funeral parade to escort the body to the place of burial. That is the practice around here too (minus the brass band) when the cemetery is adjacent to the church, but in many instances when the cemetery is more distant, we have funeral processions of cars or, as in one funeral I had, motorcycles that accompany the hearse to the gravesite for burial of the body, if there is a body to be buried.

In Jesus’ day there were funeral traditions as well. In the reading from Luke’s Gospel this morning we hear of Jesus’ encounter with a funeral procession at the gate of the town of Nain in Galilee, about five miles from Nazareth. As far as we know, Jesus did not know the young man who had died. He is not named in the text. We don’t know how old he was or what color his hair was (if he had any hair) or what he did for a living or how he died – whether from measles or malaria or an unfortunate camel accident. We don’t really know anything about him, except this: his father had died and his widowed mother had no other children. It is hard enough to lose a husband and a son, but for this widow, the death of her only son was especially painful.

Most of us have retirement plans of one sort or another – an IRA, a 401k, a defined contribution plan, a military pension – that provides a flow of income in our later years. The retirement plan for this widow was the son whose body was being carried in that funeral procession. He was the one she was counting on to protect her and provide for her in her old age. In that patriarchal society he, not his mother, was the one who inherited the father’s estate. When the son died, all the property of the deceased father reverted to the father’s family of origin. The widow was left with nothing, totally dependent upon the charity of others. This son’s death was thus not only a terrible blow to her as mother, but also a devastating blow to her future which suddenly had become very bleak. So she wept great buckets of tears for the son she loved and for herself. She did not weep alone, for a large crowd from the town was with her as they made their way through the gate toward the place where the young man would be buried.

It is not clear that Jesus knew all of this. What is clear is that he had compassion upon this widow, upon this mother who had lost her only son. The Greek word for compassion (*splanchnizomai*) is the same word Luke chooses to describe the response of the Good Samaritan upon seeing the beaten man along the road; it is the same response of the father who sees the prodigal son at a distance as he returns home in Jesus’ parable. It is more than sympathy; it is feeling ***for*** the other and ***with*** the other, a heart-moving and even heart-rending compassion that inspires action. Is it any surprise that the One who would look down from the cross upon his own mother’s grief would have compassion for this woman at the loss of her only son?

Our God is a compassionate God, a God whose heart aches when our hearts ache, a God who feels our pain and understands our grief. The miracle of incarnation is that in Jesus God came among us as one of us – feeling our pain, our joys, our sorrows. The affirmation that Jesus is fully human and fully divine is the affirmation that God understands our humanness. Standing at the gate as the funeral procession went by God’s heart was moved in the human heart of Jesus.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of a little boy who was sent on an errand by his mother. The little boy was gone much longer than expected, and the mother began to worry. Finally the boy came back home, and the mother asked him, ‘Where were you? I was very worried about you!’ The boy replied, ‘There was this boy down the street who was crying because his bicycle was broken. I felt bad for him, so I stopped to help him.’ The mother said, ‘But you don’t know anything about fixing a bicycle.’ The little boy answered, ‘I know that. I didn’t fix his bike. I sat down with him, and I helped him cry.’[[2]](#endnote-2)

Sometimes God just sits with us and helps us cry. God never says that if we are faithful and believe rightly bad things will never happen. But God promises to be with us in the midst of whatever may come – good, bad or ugly. Why God intervenes in some instances to produce a miracle while declining to intervene in others is a mystery. There is no logical explanation for it. Yet, we are assured that when a miracle does not materialize, it is not because God is absent. God is with us in the midst of our pain, in the midst of our suffering, in the midst of our sorrow – there to cry with us, there to comfort us, there to assure us that we are not alone, there to promise that even out of the worst of circumstances God can offer a healing balm and bring some good.

For the widow in Nain the compassion of Jesus upon her offered more than supportive presence; it was life-giving and life-saving. As Luke tells us, Jesus stepped into the path of that funeral procession and reached out his hand to touch the bier upon which the boy’s body lay. That very act – touching the bier – made Jesus ritually unclean under the law. Compassion for the boy’s mother moved Jesus to sacrifice his own status under the law to offer what he could to a grieving widow – the life of her son. He did so with seven brief words:

***YOUNG MAN, I SAY TO YOU: RISE!***

How startling, perhaps even chilling, those words must have been to the crowd and especially to the men bearing the boy’s body upon their shoulders! Like that moment when Jesus stood at the tomb and shouted, “Lazarus come out!” the crowd held its collective breath to see what would happen. What happened was life – new life, restored life, resuscitated life! The dead man sat up and began to speak, surrounded by the crowd of mourners, disciples and Jesus followers who had met there at the city gate!

Then the text says, “Jesus gave him to his mother.” They are the same words the writer in First Kings chooses to describe Elijah’s action after he restored life to the only son of the widow with whom he was staying. Life had left that boy’s listless body when Elijah said to his mother, “Give me your son.” After Elijah prayed to God for life to be restored to him, the child revived, and “Elijah gave him to his mother” as Jesus did. No longer were these widows childless, no longer were their futures so bleak, no longer were their hearts torn in two, no longer were they mourning – for the sons who were dead were suddenly alive and their mothers could sing with the psalmist:

*You have turned my mourning into dancing!*

*You have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,*

*so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.*

*O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever! (Ps.30:11-12)*

These mothers whose sons had been given back to them recognized the hand of God at work in a wondrous way and stood in awe of what God had done for them! Luke is intentional in drawing this parallel between Elijah and Jesus – God is powerfully at work in each of them. The crowd at the town gate too makes this connection for they acclaim Jesus to be a great prophet in whom the power of God is at work – a prophet like the great Elijah!

We know nothing more about these mothers and sons. But then, these stories are not really about the mothers and sons. They are about the power of God present among them and present among us, God with us at work in our midst to do marvelous, wondrous, miraculous, life-giving things! For, the Lord our God is stronger than death, stronger than any threat, stronger than any sorrow, stronger than any despair. That is the good news! Proclaim it to mothers and sons, to fathers and daughters, to grandparents all! Proclaim it at gravesides and bedsides, in homes and in hospitals, at this Lord’s Table and at your kitchen table, at city gates and at the pearly gates, within these walls and beyond these walls! Proclaim from generation to generation to generation: God’s power is greater than death! Alleluia! Amen

1. Gayden Metcalfe and Charlotte Hays, *Being Dead Is No Excuse: The Official Southern Ladies Guide to Hosting the Perfect Funeral*, Miramax Books: New York, 2005, p.4 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Gregory Knox Jones, *Play the Ball Where the Monkey Drops It*, HarperSanFrancisco: 2001, pp.140-141 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)