

Luke 7:11-17

"A Different Kind of Freedom"

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In our scripture reading for this morning Jesus and his followers enter the town of Nain, which was a small and unassuming town that wasn't really close to anything. The nearest larger town to Nain was Nazareth, which was about nine miles north, but Nazareth wasn't really close to anything, either. This is to say that Nain was out in the middle of nowhere. It wasn't the kind of place where you'd expect much of anything to happen, especially not a miracle.

It is obvious that something extraordinary happened on that day when Jesus journeyed far out of his way to go visit that small, forgotten town. You might call what happened a miracle, but after studying this text I'm more inclined to think of it as a sheer collision of two forces. Try to picture this scene as it unfolded.

From one direction you have a large funeral procession, heading out of the city. In those days the burials took place outside the city walls, so this throng of mourners would have been slowly making their way down the main street lifting up above them a large woven basket that contained the body of the dead man. The

dead man's family would have all gone along, but in this case there is only his mother, who is already a widow after having lost her husband. In that day and age, women had very few personal rights of their own, and so they depended upon their husbands or their sons for standing in the society. Any woman who lost her husband lost almost everything she had. And a woman who lost her husband *and* her only son would have been left with nothing. She would have had to live from that day forward as one of the lowest-regarded members of her society. During the funeral, all of the town's residents who were able to take part in the procession would have led her out to the grave. Some of them would have been wailing and weeping in an obvious display of grief, while others would have been beating drums or tambourines. In our culture we tend to conduct our funeral processions in a very somber, and quiet, and controlled way, but funerals in the day of Jesus were anything but quiet or controlled. Coming right down the main street and out the city gate would have been a resounding cacophony of anguish and hopelessness and grief, a deafening proclamation of the reality and power of death.

Now from the other direction... well, here comes another crowd. There's no weeping among these people. There's no wailing or the beating of drums. In fact, this crowd comes riding on a wave of joyous celebration. Luke 7 tells us that this very crowd had just heard the good news that a centurion's servant had been healed. He had been close to death, but Jesus healed him. The crowd following Jesus toward Nain that day was a parade. It was the steady, persistent march of renewal, a joyful proclamation of the reality and power of new life.

At the city gate, the two forces collided. It is Jesus who stops both crowds in their tracks when he reaches out, first to the widow and mother of this dead man with words of compassion, then to the dead man himself with a touch on the funeral bier. Then, as verse fourteen tells us, "those who carried it stood still."

"Young man, I say to you, rise!"

And with those words, the young man breathed, free of the bonds of death. With those words the widow mother breathed. It may have been a cry of joy or a sigh of relief. But she breathed, free of her hopelessness and despair. With those words those in the funeral procession breathed, free of their wailing and grieving and

made instead to celebrate. When those two crowds, the funeral procession led by grieving mourners and the crowd of followers led by Jesus, met at the city gate, was there really any doubt which one would be the stronger? That's how Nain got its miracle.

Now I didn't intentionally choose this text for today, July 4th. Over the last few weeks I more or less assumed that this text would have little or nothing to do with our celebration of our nation's independence. But in the last few days I began to ask myself if there was a message here for us and our nation. The message that comes through to us in this text this morning is that the miracle, of course, isn't just for Nain. It's for cities, towns, and communities that struggle with the reality and power of death, people who doubt whether their bonds of death will ever be broken. It's for places like Mint Hill, and Charlotte. It's for Washington, D.C. and New York City. It's for New Orleans and Gulf Shores. It's for Kabul and Fallujah. It's for any city, any town, any community that longs to be set free from the bonds of death, or the shackles of oppression, or the chains of poverty. Out of every city there flows a hopeless procession, which must be met with the compassion and love of Christ and those who follow him. It's up to us to love those who

suffer, those to whom Christ is reaching out in the midst of their pain. The truth is that Jesus might be reaching out to them through us.

Our Old Testament reading for this morning said it like this:

"The Lord your God is Lord of Lords, the great God, mighty and awesome... who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Through us, God is reaching out to the last, the least, the lost, and the little. And I think that's the real miracle here. It isn't so much that a dead man was raised at Nain, remarkable as that was. The greater miracle is that we are drawn into the story, into that glorious procession of Christ's triumphant followers, to share compassion, to show love, and to set people free. We're talking about a different kind of freedom here. It's not quite the same as the one that we're celebrating collectively as a nation today.

However, the two are related. One points to the other. Today as we celebrate our nation's freedom, we are able to recall the words of the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. The freedom we proclaim is the freedom that God gives.

We also remember the words of our nation's leaders. Abraham Lincoln, at the close of the civil war, was faced with the daunting task of unifying a war-torn nation. Instead of shining a spotlight on the lingering differences among the American people, he asked for compassion, based on an inclusive, unifying vision of the whole nation, South and North. Standing on the steps of the Capitol, March 4, 1865, he said: *"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan."*

That sounds reminiscent of this morning's scripture readings, doesn't it? I dare say that President Lincoln was familiar with the Bible, and understood that a great deal of what it means to be free is expressed in how we treat the suffering members of our society.

To the widow, the orphan, the homeless family, the prisoner, the outcast, the immigrant, the stranger, freedom is practiced through compassion.

Consider the words of Emma Lazarus, which are emblazoned on a plaque at the base of the Statue of Liberty: *"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"* For generations those words have served as a hopeful reminder not only to immigrants coming into Ellis Island, but to all Americans. We understand our nation to be unique, especially because it's a place that calls itself a compassionate home for the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, the stranger, the outcast, and even those who have seen the unfairness of death face-to-face. Emma Lazarus, whose name reminds us of one who was once dead but at the command of Jesus stood up from the grave, believed America to be a place where the tired, the poor, the huddled masses, would ultimately breathe, and breathe free. We as a nation are at our best when we participate in that world-changing vision described in our scripture

reading for this morning: reaching out with compassion to those who are suffering and in need.

The great challenge that we as Christians face is that we can't always count on those with political authority to follow that vision. We can't always expect those who govern to think or act compassionately or in accordance with Christ's ministry. But in that great challenge lies our call as American Christians. I once heard someone say that religion and government are two brothers, and it's the job of the older brother to remind the younger brother what he's supposed to be doing. There will be times when that is our job, to reach out, rise up, and stand up for those in our society who are marginalized, or oppressed, or forgotten. We are called to love our country, but love it - and those who live in it - with the compassion of Jesus Christ.

I am influenced by something the late Reverend William Sloane Coffin wrote in his last published work. Coffin loved this country. He fought for it in the Second World War. He served it as a CIA agent. He also criticized and demonstrated against it when his conscience required, which was his way as a Christian and a clergyman of reminding the country he loved what it was supposed

to be doing. He wrote, “How do you love America? Don’t say, ‘My Country right or wrong.’ That’s like saying, ‘My grandmother, drunk or sober’; it doesn’t get you anywhere. Don’t just salute the flag and don’t burn it either. Wash it. Make it clean.”

"How do you love America?—with the vision and compassion of Christ, with a transcendent ethic that alone can fill the ‘patriot’s dream’—that sees beyond the years, her alabaster cities gleam undimmed by human tears.” (*Credo* p.83).

May God truly shed his grace upon our country. May the compassion of Jesus Christ wipe away the tears of our cities. May the love of Christ reach out to us and all who suffer in their hour of hopelessness and despair, and make us all breathe free.

Thanks be to God. Amen.