

A Sermon for the Sunday of the ABT Synod Convention

6 June, 2010

Proper 5C / Ordinary 10C / Pentecost +2

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Luke 7:11-17

(Prepared by Bishop Ron Mayan)

**“FROM COMPASSION TO GRACE:
Christ’s Way With Us”**

Luke 7:11-17

(The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:)

¹¹Soon afterwards [Jesus] went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. ¹²As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. ¹³When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, “Do not weep.” ¹⁴Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” ¹⁵The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. ¹⁶Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has risen among us!” and “God has looked favorably on his people!” ¹⁷This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country. *(The Gospel of the Lord.)*

Dear Friends in Christ,

As you are gathered for worship today, the delegates, guests and visitors to the Synod Convention in Camrose are also gathering around Word and Sacrament to conclude their time together. We pray this morning that the decisions made by our Synod in Convention these last four days are in keeping with Christ’s will for his Church, and that we have acted faithfully toward our faithful God. I ask that you remember the Convention and its delegates in your prayers today as participants take their leave and make their homeward journeys.

Now we turn to the Word of God, and we pray:

God of all Truth, let Your Word fall upon us like a rough and cleansing wind, dispersing our sins, scattering our vanities, uprooting our indifference, that shaken loose from our illusions we shall be open to Your Love, and overtaken by Your Truth – even Jesus Christ, our Word and our Lord. Amen.

Our text from Luke’s gospel is not like a photograph of which there are a million copies. Rather it is like that one photograph no one else has ever taken before, and which you alone possess in your photo file.

I make this comparison because the healing miracle before us today has no parallel in the other gospels. Not in Matthew, not in Mark, not even in John – but only in Luke – do we find the story of the time when Jesus raised a man from the dead in the town of Nain.

And because it is unique to Luke's gospel, because Luke alone gives us this particular "snap-shot" of Jesus in this particular ministry pose, we should think of it as a very special vignette from the life of Jesus.

The details are easy to grasp. An only son, a young man according to the text, dies. Death is never easy for any person or family. But the pain of this situation is heightened when we realize the man has died pre-maturely, that he is an only child, and that his mother must face the horrible reality of being preceded into death by her child. If this were to happen to any one of us today, we know how hard that pain would be to bear.

But even more than that, this woman is a widow. In those days, in that society, a woman was not counted the equal of a man. Indeed, she wasn't a man's equal, she was a man's possession. With her husband dead, and now her son – whose possession is this woman now? Who will speak for her, who will provide for her and protect her? The answer is "no one". Her son is dead, and she has lost her place in her society.

The Lord Jesus arrives on the scene in time for the funeral procession. He reads this situation and understands it at a glance. And immediately- moved by what the hymnist calls "His love and pity infinite" – Jesus stops the funeral, touches the coffin, lifts the young man out of death and places him back in life. Miracle! But wait – the miracle isn't over yet.

Luke records these words: "And [Jesus] gave him back to his mother." In the Greek, the root word for this "giving back" is also the root word for "presenting a gift". Think through Luke's words again, attaching this meaning: Jesus presented the gift of a living son back to his mother. It is a double miracle that we witness here. Not only the dead son's life, but indeed the widow's life, is restored.

There is much for us to learn from this story as it stands. But we need to dig deeper than that. I suggest to you it is a miracle story important to us because of *what it doesn't say* about the son and his mother, and important to us because of *what it does say* about Jesus.

What doesn't it say? --- No one asked for help. Not the grieving mother, nobody in the funeral procession, not even the disciples suggested to Jesus that he ought to intervene. And something else is absent. Nowhere does it say that the grieving mother was a woman of faith, nor is any such statement made about the dead son. By implication and omission, Luke would have us realize that neither the woman nor her son knew who Jesus was or had faith in him. And the story finally omits to say those words we have come to expect from Jesus at the conclusion of a healing miracle: "Your sins are forgiven you. Go and sin no more. Your faith has made you well."

But this story is even more important because of what it does tell us about Jesus. When the Lord saw the widow about to bury her only son, he had *compassion*. Compassion is not a mere sympathetic reaction, or a feeling sorry for. To have compassion as Jesus did is to make the other person's condition or situation your own – to literally wrap your innards around another human being and their plight. Compassion is not a “head thing”; it's a “heart thing”. That's the kind of compassion Jesus had, a compassion that moved him, indeed compelled him, to action. Here we see crisis intervention at its magnificent best. Think of it, and be comforted by it: Jesus, true man, true God, our Savior, King and Judge, is surveying us even now – and not critically, but compassionately.

From all of this we glean a very basic truth about God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and the way the persons of the Trinity relate to us and work in us. God works in the lives of people whether that is asked for or not. God does not need to be motivated by us; what motivates God is God's compassion. God moves from compassion to grace: that is Christ's way with us.

This miracle story can be seen in its broader context as a parable. In truth, it is *our* story. We were that dead son being carried in funeral procession. Scriptures tell us we enter this world wearing the chains of sin. Each of us is spiritually stillborn, by nature children of wrath.

The grieving mother? She symbolizes all those who care for us, love us, give the best and want the best for us, but who – in the face of physical or spiritual death – are powerless to affect the cure required.

But the bottom line is our compassionate Christ. We didn't go searching for him; his heart saw us first, and his love reached out. By our own reason and strength we could not believe in Jesus Christ our Lord or come to him. So the compassionate Christ comes to us by his Spirit.

His manger, cross and empty tomb are the landmarks he left us, the supreme signposts of his compassion lived out toward all of humankind. As he raised a dead son so long ago, so Christ lifts us up – out of the coffin of sin, self and Satan – he takes us out of the very clutches of death and sets us on course toward new and abundant life.

From compassion to grace. Those were the steps Christ followed, this was the sequence of events, and this was the way Jesus dealt with a dead man and his grieving mother in the little town of Nain. And – thanks be to God! – This is the way our loving Lord will deal with each of us today and all of our tomorrows: from compassion to grace.

Even so, Come Lord Jesus. Amen.