

Jesus Interrupts a Funeral

Today in our New Testament reading, we see one of three instances as recorded in the Gospels when Jesus brought the dead back to life (Mark 5:21-24, 35-43; John 11:1-44). In these miracles of raising the dead, Jesus demonstrates that he is “the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). In our text, Jesus is walking with his disciples and a large crowd as they meet a funeral procession.

Luke 7:11-17:

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

New Testament scholar William Barclay says that this account of Jesus’ interrupting a funeral is “in many ways...the loveliest story in all of the gospels.” Barclay describes for us the funeral procession as being headed by a band of professional mourners, who played flutes and cymbals, and uttered “in a kind of frenzy their shrill cries of grief.” Their lament was over the unutterable sorrow of a widow who had lost her only son. Life in first century Palestine for most peasants was harsh, but a widow in this society was particularly vulnerable. She was likely unemployable, and now with the death of her only son, she would be dependent for charity as her only means of support.

When Jesus approaches this funeral he joins the purposes of God to not only minister to this grieving widow, for whom he is moved with compassion, but also to reveal himself to be the eternal Son of God and Lord of life. In fact, this is the first time in Luke’s Gospel that Luke refers to Jesus as “the Lord,” meaning the Master. Jesus will demonstrate that the kingdom whose arrival he announced was a kingdom of and about life. Thus Jesus, as he with his entourage approaches this funeral procession, proceeds to interrupt it. We can imagine our Lord Jesus as he walks through this throng of loud mourners and speaks to her some amazing words and dares to violate Jewish ceremonial law by touching the funeral bier, actions which no doubt draw the attention of the entire funeral procession.

In the first verses (11-13), we see act one in this drama of Jesus’ interrupting a funeral as he first of all confronts death itself, symbolized by the large procession of mourners following the open bier. In recent weeks, I’ve been confronted anew

with the reality of death, first with the funeral of our own Carl Metzloff and then with the funeral of my brother-in-law in Dallas, Texas. All of us face the reality of death sooner or later, and more frequently, it seems, the older we get.

Just as it was timed perfectly for Jesus to confront this procession of mourners, so is his timing to meet you and me. And his work of grace is always by divine initiative. Just as these mourners didn't seek or even know Jesus, so with us. By ourselves and left to ourselves we would not seek him. Jesus comes to us as an uninvited and yet desperately needed guest. We're in desperate need for him to interrupt our troubled lives. This grieving widow didn't invite or even know about Jesus. Her faith seemed to play little if any role in the ensuing miracle.

Here there seems to be the pitting of the forces of the kingdom of heaven against the forces of sin, evil and death. Death and Jesus cannot co-exist it seems, in the same place. Jesus came to do away with the power of sin, evil and death. Our text tells us that our Lord Jesus, just as he did in this village of Nain, has come to face the dreadful reality of death, and the sin and evil that lie behind death, which Paul terms as our last enemy (1 Cor. 15:26).

Jesus, the eternal Son of God, came into the world in order to face the dreadful reality of sin and evil and the consequence of suffering and death. The young man was not dead because he was a worse sinner than anyone else. Rather, as Jesus explained with the man who was born blind, Jesus could demonstrate in his life the power and work of God (John 9:3). Jesus had come to face and then on the cross to defeat the power of sin and the curse of death that had held the world in its grip. Without Jesus, death is an enemy to be feared. But with and because of Jesus, we can face death as a conquered foe.

Our text tells us that when Jesus saw the grieving widow, he had compassion on her. There's is no stronger word than the one used here to describe Jesus' heartfelt compassion, his feeling along with the widow in her suffering. This is our sympathetic High Priest, who fully sympathizes with our weaknesses (Heb. 4:15). This is the picture Jesus gives us of God as "the mirror of the Father's heart" (Thielicke). Jesus, the one who weeps among the mourners at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, is our sympathetic Savior (John 11:35).

Although we grieve in different ways, it's essential to our emotional health that we express our grief. Paul says, we grieve, but not like those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). Jesus wept, and we too must weep. Sometimes people, uncomfortable with the weeping of a loved one, will say, "Don't cry," even though they have no power to remove the cause of grief. But Jesus, while at the same time sympathetic, issues a command here. In the imperative he says, "Do not weep." Jesus could command her to cease her weeping because he was about to reverse the cause of her grief, the death of her son, through bringing him back to life.

We see the dramatic work of Jesus in giving life to the dead corpse, a miraculous sign in which Jesus brought him back to real, healthy life (14-15). Jesus brought the funeral procession to a grinding halt when he did something quite shocking to interrupt this Jewish ceremony. He came up and touched the bier. Thus, according to the Old Covenant prohibition against making contact with a dead body, Jesus makes himself ritually unclean (Lev. 19:11). In this way, he showed the transient nature of Old Testament ceremonial laws that he had come to fulfill and supersede. Also, he was demonstrating once again his valuing human life over laws and ceremonies.

In my seminary pastoral care training we were instructed about the need to touch those we visit in the hospital. We were told that those confined in the hospital feel cut off from others and are in need of connecting with others and thus they long to be touched. There is something reassuring about touching others and being touched by them, and our Lord Jesus is one who wishes us to be aware of his presence and to be reassured that we are more important to him than laws and institutional taboos. Through his people God often gives us his reassuring touch, and sometimes he touches us with an almost tangible sense of his loving, caring presence.

“He (Jesus) said, ‘Young man, I say to you, get up!’” (14b, NIV). The power of God is in his word. Before his incarnation, the same eternal Son and Co-Creator said, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3). Paul connects this creating command of God’s word with his saving, resurrecting word:

“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6, NIV).

And we who are God’s being-saved children, have been born again “through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23). We believed God’s promise, and the Spirit of the living God spoke life into our hearts and we came to eternal life in Christ. As Jesus explained, he himself will some day speak a command and we will hear his voice and our bodies will rise to stand before him (John 5:28-29).

In response to the word of Jesus, the dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother (15). It was the word of Jesus that raised this young man back to life and it is the word of Jesus through the Holy Spirit that raises us from our spiritual death to new life in Christ (Eph. 2:1,5). When Jesus interrupted this funeral, the object of the fear of the people was shifted from death itself to the Lord Jesus. “Fear seized all of them” (16). This is a deep sense of reverence for a person rather than a terror of the unknown, which is the fear of death. When we fear, reverence and worship the Lord of life we need never fear death again. There was now dancing in the streets of Nain.

I have had occasion to minister to hundreds of people during times of death and funeral planning for departed loved ones. I was aware of the contrast with the way North American believers and churches treat death and conduct funerals and the way they are conducted in Africa. On one of my trips to West Africa, the funeral was a comparatively simple and inexpensive operation. There was no embalming of the body, which was placed in a simple wooden box. A hole was dug, and my missionary friend used his pickup truck as the “funeral coach.” At the graveside the members of the family covered the coffin with dirt as they said their final “good-byes.”

But, O my, what a celebration was the actual service! The main road of the village was blocked off and chairs were set up to accommodate the large crowd that gathered to worship. And I mean they worshiped, with much music and dancing and preaching, two or three sermons, as I recall.

Why the difference in our funerals and theirs? These Africans seemed to have a more biblical perspective. For us in Western society, even as Christians we put too much stock in this present life. To leave it all behind, even for believers, seems a tragedy. But for those who have little of this world’s goods and have suffered much in this life, death is a more welcome prospect. And the real difference is through faith in the Lord Jesus, whose death and resurrection means that our death too is defeated and no longer means termination and the cessation of life but can be the cause even of celebration.

This is not to minimize the significance of death as a very real separation from loved ones in this life. And often, even the death of a Christian, especially those in the prime of life, may well be regarded as a tragic and seemingly senseless loss. Remember, we grieve but not like those who have no hope.

It’s appropriate for the funeral of a follower of Jesus to include the element of celebration, knowing that death is defeated by the crucified and risen Jesus, and that the one who is departed is now present with the Lord, which Paul adamantly regarded as preferable to remaining in this present life (2 Cor. 5:8; Phil.1:23). And the dancing in the streets of Nain serves as a sweet picture of the reunion we’ll enjoy when once again and forever we will be reunited with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:17).

God’s purpose in this miracle was to show to the people the greatness of the Lord Jesus. This is always God’s purpose, that he might be praised and worshiped by his creation, thus fulfilling his purpose and ours, and maximizing his pleasure and our joy. The village of Nain was near the place where the prophets Elijah and Elisha ministered. Both of them performed miracles of bringing only sons back from the dead (1 Kings 17; 2 Kings 4). And so, these villagers thought that history was being relived through this miracle of Jesus, who must, in their estimation, be a great prophet also. And so, they praised Jesus the

Prophet, who had come to visit and to help his people as Elijah and Elisha had done centuries ago.

The news of God's glorious work is not to be contained. Funerals that are interrupted like this one are not everyday occurrences. Nor is anything that God does in our lives to be regarded as insignificant. It's one thing to think of our salvation as a guarantee of everlasting life in heaven, but another to think of it as a present reality and immediate and miraculous work of the risen Christ. Those of us who acknowledge that we have been and are being saved by the grace of God need to gain an awareness of the significance of this.

Imagine the difference we'd make if we were as excited about God's work in Jesus' cross and resurrection and in our lives and in the midst of his church as were these people of Nain, who had on a partial understanding of Jesus! Do we realize the greatness of this Jesus who has visited our planet, but also has visited our lives and has indeed come to help us and live within us?

As Jesus interrupted this funeral, so would he confront our grief were he here today. Death is the last enemy we'll face, and in some ways appears the "biggest bully on the block" (1 Cor. 15:26). But Jesus has overcome death's power and removed its sting. And because he has defeated this biggest bully, we need fear nothing else in this life, things like trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, danger or sword. In Christ and because of Christ we're more than conquerors and nothing in all of creation can ever separate us from God's love (Rom. 8:35-39). Christ wants to continue his work through us to interrupt the litany of sorrow without hope. Because he lives, we too will live.