

Pastor Kenneth Mars

Christ the King & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Cody & Powell, WY

Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

September 24, 2023

Text: Luke 7:11–17

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In Luke 7:1–10, the verses immediately before today's reading, Jesus healed the servant of a Roman centurion by the power of His (Jesus') word. We are told the servant was at the point of death. Jesus began to make His way to the servant when the centurion sent messengers to Jesus telling Him that He needn't come to his house. The centurion didn't believe himself worthy of such an honor. Just speak the word Jesus, even from a distance, and my beloved servant will be healed. Jesus marveled at the man's faith. And the servant was healed, solely and completely by the power of Jesus' word.

The situation described in today's reading from Luke 7:11–17 was even more serious. With the centurion's servant, Jesus was facing a sickness very near death. But in this text, Jesus must face death head-on. And Jesus wins! Christians today and throughout the ages have rejoiced with great victory and joy knowing in Jesus there is life which overcomes death. Thus we declare with the apostle Paul, "...with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:20–21). Our courage, hope, and joy come from Jesus by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

According to vs. 11, soon after the healing of the centurion's servant, Jesus and His disciples traveled south to the town of Nain, about 10 miles southeast of Nazareth. Jesus most likely knew the area quite well, having grown up in Nazareth. Upon approaching the city gate, Jesus encountered a funeral procession (vs. 12). There's no chance of speaking a word of healing. It's too late. The young man is dead. And this isn't the first time the mother has felt the sting of death. She's a widow (vs. 12). And now, her son has died.

This incident reminds us of how unnatural and how wrong things are in this world. It's bad enough that a wife must be parted from her husband. Two lives, intertwined in fellowship and family, torn apart. We all know it's inevitable. The normal experience in this world is that sooner or later, a bride will become a widow, or a groom will become a widower. That may be the normal pattern of things, but we must never concede ground and say it is the natural order of things. It is not natural! Death is a dreadful foe with whom we can give no quarter, no compromise. It must be utterly defeated.

What is harder for us to deal with is children dying before their parents. When the young die, the grief and anguish are all the more potent. Luke subtly highlights this when he writes, "and a considerable crowd from the town was with her" (vs. 12). Funerals for the elderly have grief and sorrow, make no mistake about that. But when the young die, there is bitterness, outrage, and shock.

The unnamed woman of Luke 7 has now endured both: the death of the old, her husband, and the young, her son. And so it seems, death is the master.

Jesus sees the situation and is moved with compassion (vs. 13) and He does the unthinkable. He stops the funeral procession! Today, law enforcement officers often block on-coming traffic so that the funeral procession can proceed unhindered. It's a sign of courtesy and respect for those mourning the loss of loved ones. Jesus stops the procession. The Lord of creation is present; His work must take precedence. And this, for our good.

Upon finding the grieving mother, Jesus looks at her and says, "Do not weep" (vs. 13). Only Jesus gets to say these words. No matter how well meaning we may be, we should not say them to family and friends mourning the death of loved ones. The apostle Paul acknowledged that Christians grieve over the death of loved ones. But we do so as those who have hope (I Thess. 4:13) because of Christ's resurrection from the dead. Jesus approached the bier. Again, He does the unexpected. He touches it! Eyes must have widened to the size of saucers. Touching the dead in Israel made you ceremonially

unclean. Typically, the only ones who touched the dead were the closest of family members. But Jesus isn't afraid of death or the ceremonial law. He's the author of the Law and the Lord of life. All things bow to Him!

Jesus' strange behavior continues. He speaks to the dead. Not like loved ones so often do at the death of family and friends. Jesus doesn't speak to the young man as if to say His final goodbyes. It's quite the opposite. He speaks to the man as if he could hear and obey, as if he's alive. "Young man, I say to you, arise" (vs. 14). It like a parent telling a child to wake up so that he can get ready for school. Get up!! Amazingly, the man hears! He obeys! He rises from the bier for he is alive, through the word of Jesus. There can be no mistake about this miracle. Jesus raised the dead back to life!

In the previous miracle with the centurion's servant, faith in the power of Christ's word was highlights. Jesus said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (Luke 7:9). But in the raising of the widow's son, the power and authority of Jesus' word is emphasized without reference to anyone's faith. Nothing is said about the widow's faith or that of the disciples. The Lord Jesus acts on His own authority according to His own prerogatives regardless of the faith of the individuals involved. And that's great news for us too! Jesus acts on our behalf for our good when our faith is strong, when it's weak, when it's non-existent. Thanks be to God for His love and grace.

Jesus raises the dead man at Nain to demonstrate to us that He is the Lord of life. He has the last, authoritative word in this and every situation. In the combat between Jesus and Death, Jesus wins. Life wins. Loved ones are returned back to their families. Hope and dignity are restored. "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Such is the triumphant resurrection song we proclaim from I Corinthians 15:55–57.

The people of Nain declared that “a great prophet has arisen among us” and “God has visited his people” (vs. 16). They confessed more than they knew. God in Christ has visited His people. Through the Holy Spirit working in, with, and under the Word and Sacraments, we Christians celebrate and participate in Christ’s visitation. By faith, we live in His eternal kingdom here in time. For us, to live is Christ, to die is gain. For then we are with Christ. Such joy, confidence, and courage experienced in the midst of sorrow and adversity are given to us because Jesus Christ lived and died for us. All that He did was for our good. Every action, healing, word of teaching. The shedding of His blood and His rising from the dead redeems every millisecond of our lives. He is our Lord, the King of glory and the Lord of life. The new birth we have in Christ by the Spirit so transforms our lives that we see everything differently, we think, feel, and live differently. We seek to “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that (we) may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19).

As great as the miracle was at Nain in raising the widow’s son from the dead, it was but a preview of the greatest miracle of all: the Lord of glory stepping into our doom, and blowing it apart by rising from the dead, never to die again. As sure and certain as Jesus raised the young man at Nain, and as He Himself died and rose from the dead, so He will raise you and all His people on the great day of His second coming. And you shall be returned to the fullness of God’s design and intention from the very beginning: to enjoy life in body and soul without the specter of death ever appearing again. And so we shall rise to live before God and each other in righteousness and joy into the ages of ages. Take comfort and be encouraged in our Lord’s grace.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.