

“Does Jesus Care?”
Luke 7:11-17 and Hebrews 4:14-16
February 19/22, 2006

This week as I was preparing my message for today I was reminded of one of my favorite stories. It seems that a kindergarten teacher was observing her classroom of children while they drew. She would occasionally walk around to see each child's artwork. As she got to one little girl who was working diligently, she asked what she was drawing. The girl replied, "I'm drawing God." The teacher paused and said, "But no one knows what God looks like." Without missing a beat, or looking up from her drawing, the girl replied, "They will in just a minute."

Now that's confidence! Toward the end of his earthly ministry, when Jesus was preparing his disciples for life without him, he said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." In essence, Jesus was saying, "I am Emmanuel, God with you, if you want to know what God is like...watch me...watch what I do and say and you will know exactly what God is like."

Our Gospel text for this morning, Luke 7:11-17, involves Jesus' dramatic raising of a young man from death to life. Without question, this is a powerful miracle story. But, most importantly, this brief vignette from the earthly ministry of Jesus provides us with an up close and personal glimpse of what God is like and how God chooses to operate in our lives today. Let's turn to our text which may be found on page 65 of your red pew Bible New Testament.

The facts of this story, which is told only in Luke's Gospel, are pretty straight forward. Jesus, his disciples, and a large crowd are traveling toward the village of Nain. Earlier in the day, they were in Capernaum where Jesus dramatically healed a Roman

centurion's slave. As they approach Nain, Jesus and his followers encounter a funeral procession heading out of the village for burial. The procession, following Jewish burial custom, is led by the mother of the deceased young man and the other women mourners. Behind them are the men, some of whom carry what the text calls a "bier," a stretcher-like plank on which the young man's body lay.

The two processions are a study in contrast. Those who travel with Jesus are jubilant, having witnessed Jesus' miraculous healing earlier in the day, expectantly wondering what would happen next. Those who accompany the young man to his burial place are grief-stricken, overcome by sorrow as they mourn the loss of one who died too young. The sorrow of the young man's mother is palpable. She is a widow, and he was her only son. She has lost the two most important people in her life.

We understand that in losing her son, the widow has literally lost everything. Being a widow is difficult in any age, but in this time period, with no Social Security, no employment prospects, and no one to financially support her, she faced a bleak future.

When the two processions come in contact we expect Jesus and his entourage to step aside and respectfully wait until the mourners pass by. Instead, the text tells us that when Jesus sees the widow, he is filled with compassion for her, and he tells her not to weep. At first glance, Jesus' words seem callous and inappropriate. But, his words are followed by decisive and unexpected actions.

Jesus moved toward the pallet carrying the deceased young man. He touched it, an action that would make him ceremonially unclean according to Jewish law, and said, "Young man, I say to you, rise." And he did! The young man came to life, began speaking, and Jesus reunited him with his mother. The crowd, for their part, was stunned,

and struggled to figure out what they had just witnessed. They weren't exactly sure what had just happened, but surely God deserved praise for such a miraculous event!

These are the "facts" of this miraculous story, and as wonderful as this story is in and of itself, what it reveals to us about God and how God chooses to interact with people, is even more wonderful. Through the words and actions of Jesus, "God with us," we have a wide open window of understanding about God. Let me suggest what I sense this encounter between Jesus, the widow and her son reveals to us about God.

First and foremost, this story emphasizes that when confronting human need, God takes the initiative to reach out to people regardless of their life situation, their gender or their religious persuasion. A brief comparison of our story for today and the story which precedes it in Luke 7 illustrates this point. As I noted earlier, the first story in Luke 7 involves Jesus' healing of a Roman centurion's slave. The centurion was a powerful Gentile man who was from the ruling class of society. The widow, by contrast, was a powerless Jewish woman who was at the bottom of society. The centurion asked for Jesus to heal his slave. The widow asked nothing of Jesus. But, in both cases, Jesus graciously extended healing and new life. That's how God has chosen to operate in our world, graciously reaching out to all, meeting each person according to their need.

This story also provides us with a powerful illustration of the compassion of God. Jesus was moved by compassion to approach the widow in her time of sorrow and need. In the original language of this text, the word for compassion means a feeling down deep in one's gut that compels them to action on behalf of the one in need.

This particular word for compassion is only used by Jesus in two other places in Luke's Gospel. It is used in Luke 10 to describe what motivated the Good Samaritan's extraordinary, second mile actions on behalf of the traveler who is beaten, robbed and left for dead by the side of the road.

It is also used by Jesus in Luke 15 as he describes the father who sees his prodigal son in the distance finally returning home. It is compassion that compels the father to run to his wayward son, embrace him and welcome him home without shame.

That's how it is with God. It is God's deep compassion for us and for our situation that moves him to come to us in the midst of our distress. The writer of the book of Hebrews in our first Scripture reading for this morning describes the compassion of our Lord in these words, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (4:15)

In the midst of our difficulties and distress, we can be assured that our Lord understands and has compassion for us. When we weep...our Lord weeps with us. I read a wonderful story recently that so eloquently illustrates this point. In her book "Either Way, I Win: God's Hope for Difficult Times," Lois Walfrid Johnson writes about visiting Oklahoma City, a city changed forever by the terrorist bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, which killed 168 people. She said,

"In the national memorial building on the Murrah building site, 168 empty chairs are placed in the location where each person sat when he or she died.

Beyond that memorial and across another street is a statue constructed by St. Joseph's Catholic Church. The statue's powerful image represents a tall, white-robed Christ. He stands with his back to the busy street and the place where the federal building once stood. The representation of Christ faces a brick wall in which there are 168 empty spaces – one space for each

person who died. With bowed head Jesus faces that symbol of loss, covers his face with one hand, and weeps. In whatever suffering we know, in whatever ‘Why God?’ we ask, we cannot forget one important truth: Jesus Christ weeps with us.” (Johnson, Lois W., Either Way I Win, (Augsburg, 2000), p. 50-51.)

One of my very favorite Bible stories is found in Mark 4. Jesus’ disciples are in a boat with him when a great windstorm hits. The disciples are terrified and seem convinced that they are going to die. Much to their amazement, Jesus is asleep in the stern of the boat. In that moment, one of the disciples asks Jesus a particularly pointed question, “Master, do you not care that we are perishing?”

When you’ve been in the thick of hard circumstances, have you ever been tempted to ask that question? “Jesus, do you not care that I’m perishing?”

Our Gospel text for this morning, Jesus’ raising of the widow’s son, reminds us once again that our Lord does care...does have enormous compassion for us when we are in the thick of it.

But, that’s not all. Jesus not only cares and has compassion for the widow. He has the power to do something about her situation. He raises the young man from death to life...reversing what seemed to be an irreversible situation.

Friends, that’s how God operates. God has the power to bring new life out of death. There is literally no situation beyond his reach...not even death.

The stunned crowd that has just witnessed Jesus’ power over death exclaims, “God has looked favorably upon his people.” In some translations, this statement is rendered, “God has visited his people.” This does not simply mean that God has shown up to have tea and cookies and pay a social call. This phrase is pregnant with meaning. It is widely used throughout the Old Testament to refer to times such as the Exodus when God has come near to rescue and save his people.

That's the unmistakable meaning here. In the raising of the widow's son from death to life, God sovereignly moved and came near to rescue and to save. That's how it is with God. God does not stand dispassionately in the distance in the face of human need. God cares and has both compassion and power to rescue and save. These are the truths lifted up in Jesus' encounter with the widow of Nain.

Many years ago, I was in conversation with a woman in my congregation whose husband had just left her. In the course of the conversation, I said to her, "God cares." She replied, "I know that God cares, but does God care for me?"

Maybe you've wondered about that as well. I know that God cares. The Scriptures tell us that God loves the world. But, does God care about me and my painful circumstances?

The unnamed widow and her son bear witness today and every day that God does care about you and me. And not only does God care about us, God wants to come near to bring life into situations that feel pretty dead to us right now...troubled marriages, financial struggles, difficulties with our children, addictions, disappointments, failures and griefs.

At the beginning of the 20th century a Methodist clergyman in Philadelphia by the name of Frank Graeff was suffering from severe illness and depression. His life felt like it was unraveling. God felt very far away. In desperation, he opened his Bible and stumbled on a verse from the book of 1 Peter. He read these words from 1 Peter 5:7, "Cast your care and anxiety on God, for God cares for you." In that moment, God graciously came near and brought life to Graeff's difficult circumstances. He still

confronted difficult circumstances, but he knew with certainty that God walked with him through them.

As a response to this encounter with God prompted by the passage from 1 Peter, Graeff wrote the hymn, "Does Jesus Care?" Listen to the words from the first verse and refrain of this hymn.

Does Jesus care when my heart is pained
too deeply for mirth and song;
as burdens press and the cares distress,
and the way grows weary and long?
O yes, he cares; I know He cares,
His heart is touched by my grief;
When the days are weary, the long nights dreary,
I know my Savior cares.

Does Jesus care? O, yes, he cares. I pray that you will know with certainty today that your Savior cares for you. May it be so that all honor and glory may be given to the One who has been revealed to us as Maker, Redeemer and Friend. Amen.

