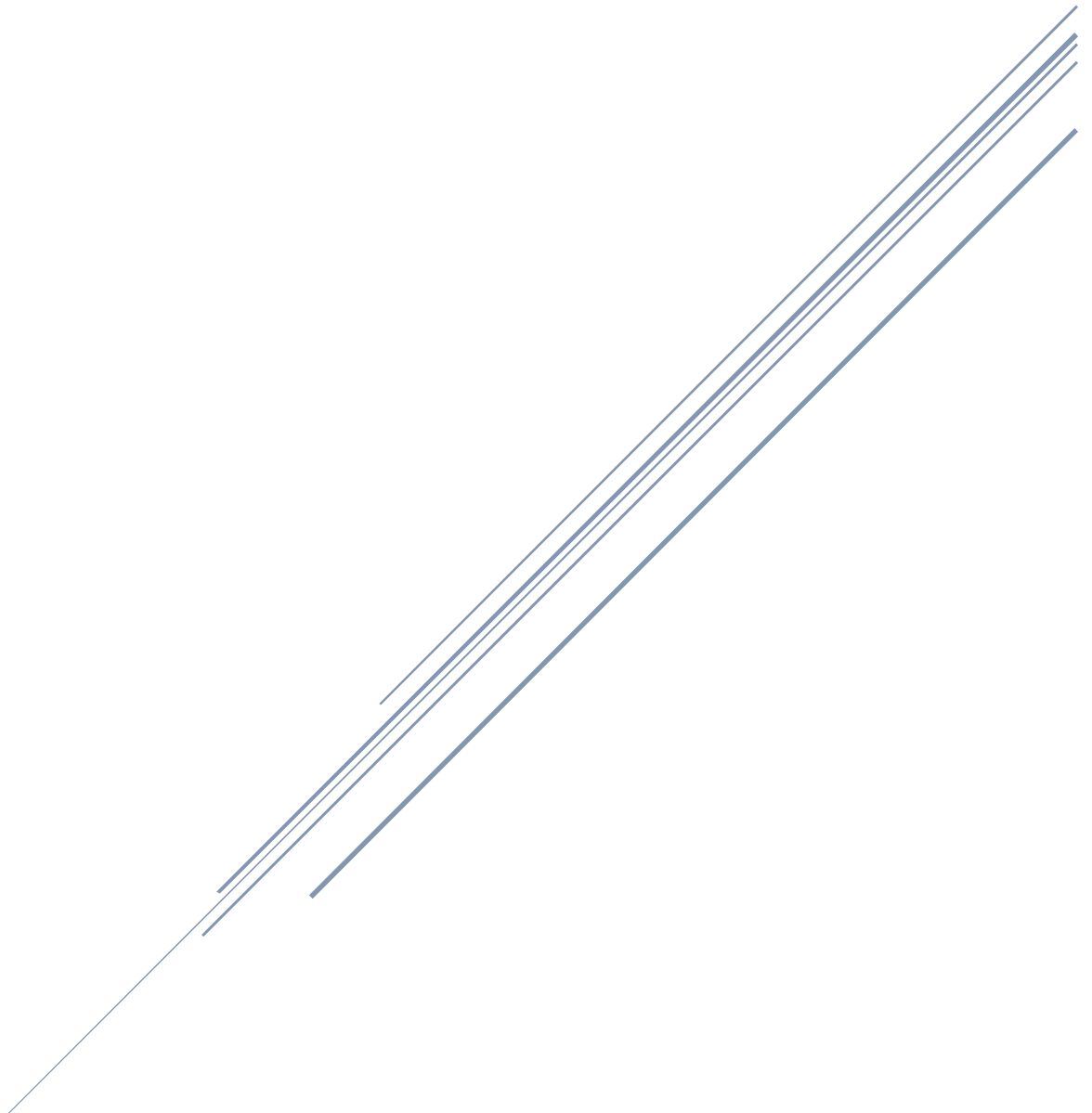


# “A RAISING IN THE SON”

*Luke 7:11-17*



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## “A Raising in the Son”

I was talking to someone in the coffee shop earlier this week about today’s story. It seems almost everybody knows the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead, or at least they’ve heard of the story of Lazarus. And everybody knows that Jesus himself was raised from the dead, but it turns out not many people know that Jesus raised two other people from the dead as well.

All four gospels tell the story of the raising of Rabbi Jairus’ daughter. Only John tells the story of Lazarus being raised from his grave. And only Luke tells the story we have this week, of Jesus raising the only son of a widow right off the bier on which he was being carried.

In each story Jesus shakes up the witnesses gathered for the traditional and expected rituals, rites, and responses the people offer in times of death – solace, company (on the way to the grave) and mourning. Jairus’ courtyard is full of people offering tears and solace for his little daughters’ passing. Jesus just walks right through them and raises her back to life.

Mary and Martha, dear friends of Jesus, are mourning the loss of their brother – Mary sobs, “If only you had been here sooner, he wouldn’t have died!” Martha, horrified seeing that Jesus intends to raise Lazarus, protests, “Lord, it’s been four days and he stinketh!”

In today’s passage from Luke, Jesus actually interrupts the funeral procession – certainly a violation in any culture but practically blasphemy in the Jewish culture – and an act of uncleanness. When Jesus raises the dead, it challenges everyone who thinks they’re prepared for, and perhaps even accepted the death.

Notice that Jesus’ actions are in response to the mourners, and not as a response to death or to the dead. It’s Jairus’ devotion and humility, Mary and Martha’s weeping, and the desperation of the widow in today’s story that prompts Jesus to intervene.

It seems like we Christians like to think that our whole purpose is to one day be one of those who is raised from the dead. But I think we ought to look at it a different way. Why don’t we relate to those who’ve been left alive?

One thing about his story that's different is that nobody asks Jesus for help. The story revolves around two people – Jesus and the widow whose son has died. Jesus sees her in the funeral procession and is so moved that he brings her son back to life. Nobody had to hunt him down. Nobody had to beg him to come and save anyone. Nobody sends a posse of Pharisees. Nobody even commends the widow's faith. In fact, the widow never says a word in this passage. Luke simply tells us that Jesus saw her and had compassion for her.

Let me emphasize that: for her. “When the Lord saw her he had compassion for her...” It's not the dead son that fills Jesus with compassion, it's his grieving mother. Why focus on her? Of course she's grieving. So were Mary and Martha when Lazarus died. But this mother's grief has an additional dimension to it.

Widows, back then, found themselves in especially precarious positions. Without a husband -- or a son, or a man of some sort -- to provide financial support and security, widows found themselves at the mercy of the kindness of their neighbors. In a patriarchal society, other than begging or prostitution, there just aren't that many ways for a widow to make ends meet.

Jesus has compassion for this widow not just because she's grieving the loss of her only son, but because this funeral procession also marks her own death in a very significant way. The son's death meant a life of uncertainty for her at best – financial disaster, starvation, and even death at worst. That's why Jesus is so moved by her and tells her not to cry. Then he shows her that her life as she knew it was not over. She is the one who is healed in this story. She is the one who is raised from the dead.

So Jesus enters the town of Nain, in Galilee – Luke calls it a *polin*, or city. And he has a sizeable crowd of disciples and other followers with him. I suppose you'd get used to that after a while. (No wonder Jesus was always heading off to pray or to be alone!) Jesus was popular, and loved by multitudes.

As Jesus approaches the city, in the King James and in the original Greek, the text reads, “Behold! There was a dead man carried out.” The word behold alerts the reader that something is about to happen. My Greek professor always said that the best translation for

*idou* -- which means look, see, behold, or lo (lo?) – is ‘check it out’. Picture it: Jesus and the large crowd ‘with him’ are met by another fairly large crowd ‘with her’ – a widow who has lost her son. They are on their way to bury him.

I like to think of Jesus and the disciples as an earthly version of the kingdom of heaven, you know? Here they are Matthew, Simon, Andrew, Judas and Thaddeus, James and John the sons of thunder, Susanna, Joanna, Mary and Martha and all the other Mary’s – Living, eating, sleeping, laughing, loving, healing, all together like a big family that loves nothing more than to be together, enjoying their time with each other. It really is the kingdom on earth.

Can you see it? A procession of death meets a procession of life. And life wins.

Luke identifies the deceased with reference to his mother: “...the only son of his mother, and she was a widow.” Israel had recognized widows from the beginning, along with orphans and strangers, as being particularly vulnerable. She is now part of the marginalized - - no means of support, relegated to the fringes of the community.

But she is very much at the center of the story. The crowd is ‘with her’ and even though she never says a word, she is the main recipient of Jesus actions.

And Jesus actions are three-fold. First, he ‘saw her.’ This by itself is significant. We often don’t see the marginalized. They’re invisible; or we look the other way.

Second, Jesus was moved with compassion for her. Now, you know how I love to find the Greek word and its definition? This one is awesome: The word is *splagchnizomai* - “to be moved as to one's bowels, hence to be moved with compassion, have compassion (for the bowels were thought to be the seat of love and pity)” – from the root word, *splagchnon*, which may be where we get our word ‘spleen.’ Maybe the best English interpretation would be to feel it in the pit of one’s stomach. Jesus is deeply moved and the fact that Luke puts Jesus compassion at the center of the story, with the widow, is telling.

Third, he speaks to her. Jesus totally comprehends the widows situation in those three actions. He sees her, he experiences her grief, and he speaks words meant for her alone. “Do not weep.” Jesus is present in her sorrow.

And the widow is the recipient of the action again at the end of the story. When Jesus raises the young man, he “gave him to his mother.” This woman who is destitute, husbandless, and sonless – she who is the epitome of the poor and marginalized, is the real recipient of Jesus’ good news. In fact, although the healing in this story seems to be all about Jesus raising another kid from the dead, I believe it should really be interpreted as the restoration of this woman back to life within her community.

Jesus saw faith in this widow from Nain. A faith honed by impossible barriers and deep courage. He never once told anyone that she should just “pull herself up by her bootstraps.” He didn’t criticize her supposedly poor decisions. He never once referred to her as a “welfare queen.” He really saw her, he spoke to her, and he was present for her.

I believe Jesus restored me. Not to my former glorious self before I ever started to drink or use drugs, that would be a cure, I think. Healing and curing are not the same. No, I believe Jesus restored me to a place where I could live in community again, once more using the gifts and graces that God had given to me from the beginning. The singing, the theatre, the compassion, the sense of humor. I’m still trying to get my head around all that I was, all that I am, and all that I could be.

I have been restored. Many of you have been restored – back to life in community. Like the widow, Jesus comes along to people like us sometimes and says, “Do not weep.”

Of course, it wasn’t a quick fix for me the way it was for the widow. All Jesus had to do was raise her only son from the dead and everything was fine. For the rest of us, it’s a slow process.

Why did Jesus heal people – especially this woman in particular? Jesus didn’t heal so he could draw a crowd in order to preach the Good News to them. The healing was the Good News! Jesus didn’t heal me so I could attract a crowd that I could preach the Good news to –

the healing is the Good news. Remember, Preach the gospel at all times and, if necessary, use words?

These healings are a living gospel as powerful as any sermon. Jesus healed because it's in the healings where we get to see a glimpse of the kingdom of God – a reign that we can participate in, right now. He was always saying it: the kingdom of God is at hand.”

So look to the widow, look to the marginalized – the bullied, the downtrodden, the poor, the frustrated, and the hopeless – and, there, you will see the fullness of faith. And there you will see Jesus inviting us to embrace the Kingdom of God.

Amen.