

Sermon Trinity 16 2021

September 19, 2021

Luke 7:11-17

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson previously read.

Those of you who are of my generation might remember Norm Macdonald. He was a regular on Saturday Night Live when I was growing up, in fact he was the one who anchored Weekend Update, the “news” section of the show, for a number of years. He was known for his dry and wry sense of humor and his nasally voice. Well, I found out on Facebook this week that he died and that apparently he had professed to be a Christian. I hadn’t heard that before, so I looked up what he had said about this, and didn’t find much. However, I did find an article that quoted him to have said, “I can’t stop myself from constantly ruminating over death.” What an interesting statement, no? And I’m sure he’s not the only one. And while we certainly don’t want to become overly morose and depressive, nor do we want to become oddly morbid like Gomez and Morticia Addams, taking time to ruminate over death on occasion isn’t necessarily the worst thing.

Now, you might think, “why would you say that?” After all, death isn’t exactly a bright and happy topic, is it? In fact, there are a few things that the Bible has to say about it that point to that, like how it’s called an enemy in I Corinthians 15. But it’s something good to reflect on because it’s inevitable.

If you might indulge me to talk about my experiences teaching at Concordia again, that’s something that we were talking about this past week. Now, we weren’t getting into the theology of death all that much. No, that will come later. But instead we were more talking about the insight it brings to us. In particular, we were talking about it in relation to meaning. You see, over the past couple hundred years there has been a shift in cultural though that has become atheistic. And the point that has been realized both within that and that Christians have said about it, is that when you take God out of the picture, things lose meaning. Think about it. If there is no God, what does any of this mean? If there is no God, one day it’s all over, and what was the point? And of course that’s why in our time and place there’s so much emphasis on the need for everyone to create their own meaning. What’s your life mean? It’s up to you. You have to figure it out.

But as I was saying to them, we all recognize there’s something else. If there’s no meaning, then even Hitler can’t be criticized for the Holocaust. Why? Because who’s to say he was wrong? And yet we all know he was. We all know that the loss of life in that way is a travesty. We all know that the loss of life under Lenin and Stalin in the Soviet Union is deplorable. We all recognize that the slaughter and oppression of tens and

hundreds of millions in Communist China is unspeakable—at least those who are still aware of the depths of such wrongs. So, we can see that there's something underlying this that's greater, that has meaning.

And we also know that death has meaning too. It has meaning that hurts. It has meaning that aches. It has meaning that shows in the depths of our hearts that something about it just isn't the way it's supposed to be.

And of course, that can cause those of us who believe in God to wrestle with God in the midst of it. Sometimes that wrestling is why a certain person had to die at a certain time. Others, it might be why they had to experience particular hardships in the process. But there is something about it that so often strikes us. And it should. Hopefully you know why: because it's the wage of sin. God created the world in life. And it was living. And what did He say about it? He looked at it and saw that it was good. It was very good. And then sin entered into the world and ruined it. Sin entered into the world and brought death.

That's what this widow in the story this morning was experiencing. She was experiencing the sorrow of death. Now, I mentioned this in my devotion, and I believe in the sermon last year, but it's worth mentioning again. Part of what makes death so hard for this widow is the consequence in her life of this death. You see, she's a widow, which of course means that her husband is dead. But that meant then that she had no household where she would have a livelihood, except for this son of hers. And so when Luke tells us that this is **"the only son of his mother,"** we have to understand the context. Not only does this poor woman have to suffer the grief of losing her only son, but on top of that, she's got to worry about where her meals will now come from. She's got to worry not only about processing the deep sorrow of this loss, but how to continue going forward to live in this world. Thanks be to God that Jesus is so compassionate! And as He is, we see the crowd marveling. And understandably! This Jesus comes to this funeral procession, and what does He do? He reaches up and touches the casket, and tells the boy, **"Young man, I say to you, arise,"** and His Word does what it says, and the boy rises from the dead. God be praised! And so the people say **"a great prophet has arisen among us!"** and **"God has visited His people."**

And there He is this great prophet, the prophet greater than Elijah as we heard about him in the Old Testament lesson. That Elijah raised the son of the widow in Zarephath but did so by prayer. This Jesus spoke and it happened. Clearly, it's true, **"God has visited His people!"** There is God, in the flesh, the body of this Jesus, standing with His people.

Of course in Luke that term to visit has some baggage. Zechariah sang it to John the Baptist at John's birth. He told him how he would be the prophet to prepare the way of the Lord, because this Lord was coming, God was visiting His people.

Now as I say that, we have to understand that God visiting His people could be trouble. As we're here ruminating on death a bit, we already made the point that death is the wages, the judgment, of sin. You see God's visitation bringing judgment sometimes. You think about the parables that Jesus tells. There's the vineyard where the owner rents it out, and the people won't give their due to him. So, he sends a servant whom they kill. Then he himself visits and the promise is trouble. Or you see it in the history of Israel. He doesn't make a bodily visit there, but judgment comes. They are overtaken by Babylon, they suffer defeats in wars. David takes the census to be satisfied by just how strong his army is, God sends judgment on them decreasing the military might significantly. So, that's something we have to cognizant of.

But what do we see with this visitation of Jesus? Is He bringing judgment like that? No, He's not. Although He is bringing judgment. He's bringing judgment against death. You see, wherever God brings judgment, He brings salvation for His people. The flood was judgment, but salvation for Noah and His family. This raising this boy, this life and death of Jesus, this resurrection of Jesus Himself, that's judgment. It's judgment against sin and death. But it's salvation for you.

And what is so amazing is the extent, just how awesome this visitation is. What do I mean? Well, look at this story. There are two subtle details that give us so much insight into this visitation. You know, it's so neat when you see these things in the text. Think about it. We believe these words are given by the Holy Spirit, so we should look at each one and understand. We, of course, don't want to miss the forest for the trees, but look at the words. First, Jesus looks at this woman and what does it say? He saw her and "**he had compassion on her.**" Now, that's not all that insightful in itself. Of course Jesus had compassion on this woman. That's not unique here. It happens regularly that you hear that Jesus had compassion on the person. And I've pointed out before how this is important in general because it's that word that tells you that Jesus felt it in His guts. He felt the hurt for this woman so much it pained Him in His guts. That is insightful about this God in the flesh, but why do you think Luke tells us that here. Why do you think the Holy Spirit wanted to make sure we heard it here? Because of what I said before. As a widow at that time she would not have had livelihood. It's not like she could just go get a job at a business, or as a nurse or anything. Women didn't work in the way they do now. She was supposed to be cared for by her son. But now he's dead. Her only son, her caretaker, her provider. So it hurt Jesus to know that she was not going to be taken care of. And just like we talked about last week with Jesus telling you to look at the birds and know you are of

more worth than they, so also we hear this compassion and know He wants to care for you and your bodily needs now.

But there's the other part. You see, need and experiencing a lack of provision, that's a byproduct of this fallen world, but it's a consequence, not the cause. Jesus had to deal with the cause. I referred to that already too. He had to take sin upon Himself. But we need to think about this for what it really is. We need to understand the immensity of the sacrifice. And a part of that we can see by looking at another detail: **"Then he came up and touched the bier."** On the surface, again, this might seem insignificant, but it's not. It might just seem like, "of course Jesus reaches up and touches the man, that's what He does, He makes contact with them." In fact, I preached on the importance of Jesus' physical connection a few weeks ago when we heard about Jesus sticking His fingers in the ears of the deaf man. So that is important, but it's even more important here.

You see, in the Old Testament Law, one was not to come in contact with death. I think I've mentioned it before, but you see it here loud and clear. He wasn't supposed to come in contact with death, but because death as the consequence of sin was unclean. In fact, not only was it ceremonially unclean, you could make the connection that it's unholy in itself. Remember I said in the beginning that death is called an enemy by Scripture. Well, here Jesus is coming in full contact with that unholy filthy enemy Himself. This holy and blessed God in the flesh reached out and touched the sewage of our sin. For you.

I'm sure you know that. But ponder that mystery again. Jesus cares so much for you, has so much compassion for you that He cares for your earthly needs, but even more He cares for the state of your body and soul eternally. He cares to rescue you from the prison of this sin, He cares to reach out to you and touch you and say, **"I say to you arise."** And the joy for you is that He has. He won your freedom in His death and resurrection where He overcame death for you. And now He reaches out and touches you that you would rise as He has baptized you, as He contacts you in His body and blood.

As you ruminate on that, hopefully it brings joy to you out of death. I mentioned my class and our conversation this week on atheism and death. And we're just talking about philosophy at this point. In that conversation, death ends up being so depressing. But Christians, in Christ, it's not. In Christ, yes it's an enemy, but the enemy has been defeated to become a useful servant. As Jesus has touched death for you, put your death in sin upon Himself, He now promises you are raised to life in Him. Death no longer has dominion over you. Instead of death, you have eternal life. As we say at funerals, "Jesus said, 'I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.'" Thanks be to God. Amen.