

We Together
Luke 7:11-17
Preached by Rev. Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, June 6, 2010

Today's Gospel lesson is unique to Luke: Jesus raising from the dead the son of the widow of Nain. Jesus was entering the town when he and the crowds following him plowed head on into a funeral procession just leaving the town. Luke then reports Jesus had compassion on the widow, literally an overpowering gut reaction moving him to bring her son back to life. Not surprisingly a sense of awe overcame the crowd, causing them to glorify God and spread the news of this miracle throughout the Judean country-side.

On the surface this seems to be still another miracle story revealing Jesus' divinity. The crowds pronounced him to be a great prophet but we know better. Obviously Luke stuck this story in the middle of things providing more documentation certifying Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God.

Still, we sell this story short if that's all we take from it. Sure, Jesus is Lord, that's the essential pillar of our faith. All the more reason to explore the implications of this claim to their logical conclusions. Putting it simply, since we believe Jesus is Lord, how should we be working together as a faith community?

That's a question all faith communities need to grapple with if we are to be fully functional as the Church or as St. Paul sometimes put it, the Body of Christ. We can all shout at the top of our lungs, "Jesus is Lord," 'til we're blue in the face, but if our words aren't complimented with actions, we become noisy gongs and clanging symbols. But when we rise to the occasion we become the Body of Christ.

Notice I said when "we" rise to the occasion. Sometimes the message of the sermon is specifically addressed to you, the individual, other times the message is meant for the collective "we." Remember "we" are the Body of Christ. "We" are the Church called to be Christ's heart and mind, hands and feet, doing together the ministry of justice and reconciliation Christ left us. (Remember, there is no "Plan B.")

Now why did I just spend time stating the obvious, the Church is not "me" but "we." Mostly because our culture encourages the Cult of Me, and especially the myth of the lone ranger who acts alone without the consultation or approval of others, charting his own course and making his own rules.

Often without realizing it we bring this notion into the Church with the inevitable result we inevitably go off the tracks.

That's why congregations need to have regularly scheduled reality checks to make sure we're in sync with God's will and each other. Congregations avoiding these reality checks quickly wander off into no man's land where massive expenditures of time and energy are needlessly wasted on superficial causes that neither proclaim the gospel nor promote God's Kingdom in a world desperately in need of both.

The story of Jesus raising up the widow's son is one of those stories we should measure ourselves against to determine whether we're on or off the tracks. Since we are the Body of Christ, we need to consider the question, "Are we together being that Christ-like presence in the world?"

Keep in mind I'm not asking are "you" but are "we," as a congregation, coordinating and using our God given resources to become that organized faith community working together to do something grand and wonderful that can't be done by lone rangers?

Before we address these questions let's first see what can be learned from this morning's gospel story that not only can inform, but also motivate us to work together using the resources we're given, to make a dent in the hard world we live in.

We find this story in the seventh chapter of Luke, and it's important knowing what immediately preceded Jesus' miracle in Nain to put this story in its larger context.

The last half of chapter six is dedicated to Luke's version of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount beginning with Luke's interpretation of the Beatitudes. And I say Luke's interpretation, because there's a nuanced difference between Luke's and Matthew's beatitudes.

For instance, Matthew reports Jesus saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" whereas Luke simply has Jesus saying, "Blessed are you who are poor." In Matthew we read, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" while Luke simply reads, "Blessed are you who are hungry." Both say the same thing, differently. Matthew expresses concern for our spiritual needs while Luke expresses concern for our material needs and both have equally important implications: the Church is responsible for caring for people's souls, and their quality of life. We can't do one without the other.

Isn't that what Jesus did throughout his ministry? He not only preached, he also served. His ministry wasn't just confined to talking about God. That's why he not only preached "love your neighbor," he lived it by healing lepers, accepting hospitality from tax collectors and sinners, speaking truth to power whenever he confronted the Pharisees over their exclusive and unjust practices,

feeding the hungry on at least two occasions, healing the sick and yes even raising the dead.

Which now brings us to Jesus' compassion for the widow of Nain. If he wanted to, Jesus could have simply offered his love, sympathy and prayers. That alone would have been totally appropriate. But his deep feeling of compassion was compounded by the moving of the Spirit, compelling Jesus to go beyond feeling compassion to restoring her quality of life.

I say "restoring her quality of life" because in Jesus' day widows by custom and law became non persons at their husbands' death, especially if they had no sons to provide for their material needs. Widows could only depend on the kindness of relatives and friends to guarantee any quality of life. So once again, Jesus draws our attention to the marginalized people who live among us and our responsibility to use the resources we've been given, to do what we can to bring Christ into their lives.

You probably noticed I keep repeating the phrase "using the resources given us." Last Sunday I identified those resources as being our buildings and grounds and of course ourselves. Of the two which is the more valuable? Not our building and grounds, but ourselves.

The 19th century Robber Baron Andrew Carnegie once boasted, "Take away my iron mines, my factories and capital, but leave me my organization and in five years I'll reestablish myself."

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Whether he realized it or not Carnegie was boasting about being a good steward of his most valuable resource, the people in his organization.

Carnegie was also confident in his employees' professional stewardship of their time, talents and energy plus their coordinated teamwork that made their company successful.

After several years of visioning, planning and transformational growth we now have an opportunity to be good stewards of our resources, primarily the resource of ourselves. We're at the point of not just talking about serving in the community but actually doing it.

Our mission field: Pleasant Plains Elementary School. Why there? Because we heard there's need, we offered our resources and they gratefully accepted. What's the immediate need? Generally, being a strong but quiet Christ-like presence to the children, teachers and parents. Specifically they are asking for reading mentors who can give some time once a week to encourage children to read. The Outreach Team is also committed to working

collaboratively with the PTA sponsoring evening programs and hopefully building meaningful relationships between us and Pleasant Plains Community. (Remember the Christian faith is primarily about building quality relationships first with God, then our neighbors and also with ourselves.)

During the summer the Outreach Team will be looking for people willing and ready to go out into our neighborhood to bring Christ to our neighbor through service to the least of these. Many of you, because of your work schedules will obviously be unavailable during school hours, but some of you will. The Outreach Team's goal is to have a team of mentors in place by September.

This will be Babcock's first long-term organized and coordinated outreach into our neighborhood in recent memory. Whether you can be a mentor or not, your support is needed. Pray certainly, but also be open to exploring the stewardship of yourself, your time, talents and energy offered up as a living sacrifice, which is your spiritual worship and then going together to do God's work.

We are the Body of Christ. Jesus himself has showed us how to be his Body and bring his gospel to our time and place.

Pray we come together as one so together we can be a powerful witness of Christ's Gospel and his coming Kingdom right here in our own neighborhood.