

SERMON  
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 10  
June 6, 2010

1 Kings 17:17-24  
Psalm 30  
Galatians 1:11-24  
Luke 7:11-17

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

Joseph Bayly knew what it was like to lose a child. In fact, he and his wife Mary Lou lost three sons – one at eighteen days, after surgery; another at five years, with leukemia; and the third at eighteen years, after a sledding accident. So when Joe Bayly wrote about the death of a child, people listened. Here is a part of what he had to say:

“Of all the deaths, that of a child is most unnatural and hardest to bear. In Carl Jung’s words, ‘it is the period placed before the end of the sentence, sometimes when the sentence has hardly begun.’

You see, we expect the old to die. The separation is always difficult, but it comes at no surprise. But what about the child, the young person? Life lies ahead, with all of its beauty, its wonder, its potential. Death is a cruel thief when it strikes down the young.

And the suffering that many times precedes death is another reason childhood death is so hard for parents to bear. After all, children were made for fun and laughter, for sunshine, not pain.

In a way, it is different from any other relationship. For a child is bone of a parent’s bone, flesh of their flesh. When a child dies, part of the parent is buried.

The author R. Kent Hughes told of a time that he met a man who was in his seventies. “During our first ten minutes together” he writes, “the man reached for his wallet and brought out a faded photograph of a child – his child, who had died almost fifty years before.”

Shortly after Jesus healed the Centurion’s servant, we find Jesus traveling toward the town called Nain accompanied by a large crowd. The name Nain means “pleasant” or “delightful.” However, on this day, its pleasantness and delightfulness was overshadowed by something dark, gloomy, and fearful. It was death.

As Jesus is leading his disciples and all those who were following them into the town of Nain, they meet a very different crowd. The crowd with Jesus is undoubtedly joyful, jubilant and expectant. Everything is upbeat.

But the crowd heading out of town in the opposite direction has a very different demeanor. They are mourning the death of a widow’s only son. There is no joy, no hope, no expectancy. Jesus is headed towards the town – a place of life and vitality. The mourners are headed towards the cemetery – a place of death and grief.

I would guess that most of us, at some point in our life, have made that long walk to a gravesite. I have done it myself, probably close to a hundred times. But think of this. A person doesn’t have to quit breathing in order to experience death.

One sweltering afternoon, on the dirty streets of a dangerous section of New Orleans, a man approached a woman with some papers in his hand. He asked Helen if she would agree to write letters to a man on death row at Angola prison. Helen agreed, rather absent-mindedly. For she was used to people asking her for favors.

You see, she had lived in the rough part of town for a little over three years. She served in a mission center where her Catholic order had sent her. It was nothing out of the ordinary for a nun to be asked to help people in trouble.

So that night Helen wrote the letter, and, without realizing it, began a relationship with the prisoner. It emerged into an emotional attachment. From there it became a concern and then a passion for those awaiting execution. Sister Helen Prejean has become an advocate for life, humanity, and justice.

She eventually wrote a best selling book that was later turned into a major motion picture. It was entitled; "Dead Man Walking." "Dead Man Walking," is Sister Helen's way of describing the more than fifty men whom she has served as spiritual advisor before they were sent to their deaths.

"Dead Man Walking" is her provocative description of what she sees as she looks into their eyes, as she tries to listen to their hearts, and as she speaks to them of Christ. For in their despair, they are alive in body – walking. But they are dead in spirit. They are fatally wounded in their hearts – all but destroyed as human beings.

"Dead Man Walking." It's a haunting and terrible image. It's hard to even comprehend how someone can be physically alive and yet spiritually and emotionally dead.

But somehow, we as a society have been creating that. We are making people into "Dead Men/Women Walking." And it's not just criminals. You can see it in the face of a woman who has suffered years of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of the one to whom she once said; "I do, till death do us part."

You can see it in the face of the teen that is constantly teased and bullied. You can see it in the face of those who get up every morning and trudge off to work for another long day in a job that is necessary, yet unfulfilling. You can see it in the eyes of a child whose parents are always screaming and fighting. You can see it in the faces of those on the Gulf Coast who have lost their way of life due to a disastrous oil spill.

You can see it in face of parents who are desperately crying for help when their children seem to be out of control. You can see it in the lonely eyes of a spouse who has just lost their life long partner. We could call all of these people “Dead Men/Women Walking.”

For in these children of God, the light of life seems to be flickering, if not gone altogether. And finally, you can see it through the tears of a widow from Nain who was about to bury her only son.

But then she encounters Jesus. And when Jesus saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, “Do not weep.” I thought for a long time about these words of Jesus – “Do not weep.” They say nothing, yet they say everything. “Do not weep.”

I find it interesting that we are told nothing about whether this son deserved compassion. Who knows? Maybe the guy had it coming. How did he die? Was it due to illness? Violence? Suicide? An accident? Who knows? Maybe he had been killed as he was attempting to commit a crime? Perhaps he had been carousing the town all night and drank himself into oblivion. We don’t know.

And there is nothing to suggest that Jesus conducted an investigation. We are only told that Jesus expressed compassion. That’s it – clear and simple.

A young man was dead, a mother was grieving, and, in the mind of Jesus, it was time for love. It was time for compassion. For you do not parcel out compassion on the basis of who deserves what. You just love, unconditionally.

However, too many times, we tend to want to justify love and compassion before we offer it. We say things like; “If all of those people in Africa would quit having kids, there wouldn’t be so many starving children.” Or, “If they would just get off stinking welfare and get a job, our taxes wouldn’t be so high.”

Or, “If those people coming across our borders did so through the proper legal channels, then we would welcome them.” In other words, if everyone could be like you or me, then they would be acceptable. You see, we like to give out our love and compassion based on those who we think deserve it.

But on the other hand, we are sure glad that God is not like that. After all, which of us really deserves the love and compassion of God? None of us!

But that’s what grace is – the undeserved favor of God. Love that comes unconditionally. Who has earned the favor of God? No one! For all of us have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

You see, Jesus offered healing to a young man of uncertain character, in mysterious circumstances, in questionable surroundings. Perhaps that is our calling also.

Jesus also offered compassion to a single mother, now bereaved. And he gave her a reason to hope. Perhaps that too is our calling.

But I want you to notice that Jesus did not stop with offering sympathy. For compassion is a good deal more than just sympathy. Jesus did much more than offer teary-eyed clichés. Jesus used his authority to give life!

“Young man, I say to you, rise!” And the dead man sat up and began to speak...

“Young man, I say to you, rise!” And guess what? He did! He really did! He sat up, shook off his slumbers, rubbed his eyes, got the smell of spices out of his nostrils, and began to speak! Oh, I wish that Luke had written down what he said.

What would be the first words of a man when he comes back to life? All we are told is that fear seized them all. But look what the authority of Jesus can do for a dead man.

Well, that may be all well and good, but what does that mean for us today? Where is that authority today? Who stands in the place of the Lord and acts on his behalf? We do. We, His people. We, the Church – the Body of Christ. We have the authority to raise the dead.

Now you may say; “Oh yea, sure. When is the last time you brought someone back to life?” But you see, we are defining new life too narrowly.

For the church is not in the business of resuscitation. Because if you think about it, everyone who is resuscitated eventually dies. Rather, the church is in the business of resurrection.

Do you see the difference? Listen carefully. Resuscitation is getting someone to breath again after they have stopped breathing. Of course, this is only temporary until they eventually die again. Resurrection, on the other hand, is bringing new life – indeed everlasting life, to those who are dead in mind, body, or spirit.

And Jesus has given his Church, you and me, the authority to bring this new life to all of the “Dead Men/Women/Children Walking” in our world today. For we have been given a message of hope. It is a hope that puts the light back into our lives. It is a hope that assures us that we are loved no matter what. And it is a hope that must be shared.

“Young man, I say to you, rise!” And the dead man sat up and began to speak. Yes, it can still happen when we encounter Jesus. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.  
Amen.

How many of you have ever heard of the word “compassion?” Can you tell me what it means? *It means feeling sorry for someone. But it also means doing something about it.*

In our Bible story today, Jesus saw a woman who was very sad. Her husband had already died and now her only son had died. And she was going to his funeral. She had nobody left! And Jesus had “compassion” for her because she was sad and crying.

But he also did something. Do you know what he did? He raised her son from the dead. He made him come alive again!

Now have any of you ever made someone come alive again after they are dead?

Do you know what? I think that you have!

Maybe a friend of yours was feeling very bad about something. And you felt sorry for them and had compassion. Maybe you gave them a hug or said something nice to them. This made them feel like they are alive again!

When we are baptized, Jesus gives us new life. And then as Christians we have a special mission in the world – to tell and show others how much God loves them. This is called compassion.

Let us pray... Dear Lord, thank you for your compassion towards us, and help us to show compassion for others. Amen.