

The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity, A✠D, 2008

Luke 7:11-17 Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. ¹² As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. ¹³ And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." ¹⁴ Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." ¹⁵ And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. ¹⁶ Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people!" ¹⁷ And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 Life is fragile, it seems. This the widow has learned clearly. This funeral procession was not altogether unfamiliar to her, as she had traveled beside the bier when they took her husband to be buried, as well. In marriage, they had become one flesh, so in death, she was half the person she was in marriage. It's the inevitable end of every faithful marriage, even as on their wedding day they vow their love and service until death parts them. But that was only the first blow. Now the widow had to follow the funeral procession for her only son. The widow is not alone, though. In fact, there are three such widows who, having endured the heartbreak of having to bury a husband now grieve the loss of their only sons.

2 The first widow is from Zarephath. Remember her from last week's readings? Elijah came to her and told her to bake him some bread using the last of her flour and oil. He promised that her flour and oil would not run out, and she would be able to continue to provide food for herself and her son. Shortly after this miraculous provision of food that sustained her life and the life of her only son, her son fell ill and died. She lashed out angrily at Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!" That's what death does. It reminds us of our sin. The wages of sin is death. All die because all are guilty of sin.

3 Death is unavoidable. It's commonplace. Even news of large-scale deaths, even days of tragedies we tell ourselves we will remember, we soon forget. But when death strikes close to home, we, like this widow, are given a stark look at ourselves and our demise. 4th century church father Gregory of Nyssa once preached, "Are you not ashamed, you little clay doll, soon to be dust, blown up like a bubble with your own momentary puff, full of pride, all swollen with inflamed delusion and inflating your mind with empty conceit? Have you not seen in the burial grounds the mysteries of our existence? Have you not seen the heap of bones piled on each other, skulls stripped of flesh, staring fearsome and horrible from empty eye-sockets? Have you

seen the grinning mouths and the rest of the limbs lying casually about? If you have seen those things, then in them you have observed yourself.”

4 Death always reminds you of your own mortality. And so, like the widow of Zarephath, death always reminds you of your sinfulness. In that way, death serves as a healthy call to repentance, lest you die impenitently in your sins. Death is a reminder that your excuses, your rationalizations, your self-justifications will cease in the grave. So repent.

5 But through Elijah, the Lord performed for this widow an even greater miracle than a bottomless jar of flour. Life was fragile, the widow had learned, after the two closest to her died. But when the prophet of the Lord came to her dead son, it was death that was fragile. Elijah stretched himself upon the dead boy three times, praying to the Lord to restore his life. And the Lord raised her son back to life. See, your son lives. But this was just a sign of the Prophet greater than Elijah who was to come.

6 The second widow was following the funeral procession of her dead son, her only son, out from the city of Nain when she met another procession. Jesus and His disciples and a great crowd met the dead man, his mother, and a considerable crowd from the town. The two crowds converged at the gate of the town. Death led the procession out of the city. And the Prince of Life led the procession into the city. So the Lord of Life commanded the widow not to weep and laid His hand on the bier. Every other time, when the instruments of death encounter life, life loses. Life is fragile, as the widow had learned. But not this time. “Do not weep,” He said. When anyone else gives that advice, it’s downright rotten. Even St. Paul won’t tell you not to weep altogether, but to weep like one who has hope. But Jesus told the widow not to weep. And fragile death was shattered; the young man rose, as the Lord called out to the dead man to live.

7 There was a third widow, as well, the widow from Nazareth, the Virgin Mary. Tradition holds that by the time her only Son reached adulthood, her husband Joseph, the adopted father of Jesus, had passed away. So there she was at the foot of the cross, her husband passed away, watching her only Son dying. It was he who instructed the widow of Nain not to weep. And how could He say such a thing? Because in His death, he took her suffering, he took her weeping, took her sorrow onto Himself. Not just hers, but yours, as well, beloved. He has taken your sin, your sickness, your suffering, your tears, your terrors, your trials, onto Himself. And He bids you weep no more.

8 The Widow's Son, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is Life. Life endured death for you. And death's power was forever shattered. Life is not fragile for you, dear Christian, because your Lord has died and has risen. Death is fragile. Until the day of your Lord's return, death will claim you. You will die. But death is frail and impotent. His feeble grip on you will forever be loosed when He who touched the funeral procession at Nain comes to end funerals forever.

9 The Lord has stretched Himself over you three times through His promised means of grace. In the waters of Holy Baptism, the Lord stretched Himself over you. Your dead, lifeless self was called to live. Young man, I say to you, arise. Live as a beloved child of God. Receive the Lord's gift of new life, the forgiveness of sins, and the hope of life everlasting. In Holy Absolution your Lord has stretched Himself over you. Young woman, I say you, arise. Your sins are forgiven. In His holy Supper, the Lord stretches Himself over you. Young man, I say to you, live. Eat the Body of the Lord of Life. Let Him pour the Blood of Life into your mouth. A great Prophet has arisen among you! God visits His people!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
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