

The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity, A²D 2010

Luke 7:11-17

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

1 Life seems fragile. A quick look at the obituaries any week will reveal what you already know: We have funerals for old ladies, young children, and Adonis-like young men who seemed to be at the apex of health and stamina. And all it takes is one out of control car, one virus, one mutated gene, one natural disaster, one careless moment next to a machine and life is seemingly easily extinguished. The body can only go without food for weeks, only without water for days, only without oxygen for minutes. Life seems fragile, almost delicate, more easily lost than saved. And yet, seems is a stupid word. Things are not what they seem.

2 It seemed to this widow like death was more powerful than life. She was no stranger to this procession, marching out of Jerusalem to the burial place. She had done it before, when her husband died. And now, here she was again in this procession, this time leading her only son's funeral procession. Walking beside the bier, nothing seems more permanent, more potent, than death. If life seems fragile, death seems robust and durable. Having wept through the funerals of her husband and her only son, this widow knew that life seemed hopelessly fragile. But things are not as they seem; she didn't know that Life had a body and a face and a name.

3 It also seemed to the widow of Zarephath like death was more powerful than life. Sometime after she had buried her husband, poverty slowly settled in. You heard of her from last week's Old Testament reading. Her ability to provide for her only son waned. Eventually, she had only a bit of flour and a few drops of oil. As she was gathering sticks to bake her last loaf of bread in the midst of the severe drought in Israel, assuming that she and her son would eat and then prepare to starve to death, the prophet Elijah came to her. He commanded her to bring him some bread. Having only the prophet's promise that, if she spent the remainder of the flour and oil baking bread for him, the flour and oil would not be depleted until the end of the drought, she baked bread for Elijah. And she and her son ate better than they would have, had she conserved the remainder of flour and oil.

4 But life was still fragile. And, despite the miraculous provision of food, her only son died. So she complained to 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." Death reminded this widow of her sins, and, even having received God's gracious provision of flour and oil, the death of her only son made her doubt God's care for her. Death seems so powerful, and it seems as if God, who sent Elijah to her, does not care about her. Or, if He does care, all He cares about is rubbing in her face what a miserable sinner she is.

5 Likewise, it seems to you like there are real dangers in the world. Crashing cars, bullets, farm machinery, wars, drugs, cancers, and germs seem to threaten. And they seem powerful. Compared to any of these dangers, your life seems fragile, like the widows' knew their lives to be. Like them, you've wept beside the caskets of loved ones. You, like them, have been a part of that procession: dying people carrying out their dead to be buried. 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.

6 But seems and is are not the same words. What your eyes see and what your ears hear are different. It seemed on another day, as another widow, the widow of Nazareth, watched her Only-Begotten Son dying, that death was stronger than life. Life seemed fragile. It seemed to death that he

was the victor. It seemed to the devil that he had won. But seems is not is. When the curtain was pulled back, torn in two, top-to-bottom, seems stopped and reality was displayed.

7 Seems and is are not the same. The son of the widow of Nain seemed hopelessly dead. The procession of dying people carrying a dead man out of the city seemed to be as real as it got. Until the procession of death out of the city met the procession of Life. The Lord of Life interrupted the mourning procession—uninvited—and touched the dead man, commanding him, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” Then, for a moment, seems surrendered to is. Death which seemed permanent turned out to be hopelessly fragile, and life, which seemed fragile, turned out to be more durable than death. At the powerful Word of Jesus, the young man rose to life. Death surrendered. So also when Elijah stretched himself over the dead son of the widow of Zarephath, by the powerful, does-what-it-says Word of God, the boy arose. Seems is not the same as is.

8 So could it really be that He who stopped the funeral procession out of Jerusalem, who stops every funeral procession with His command to rise, who spoke and death obeyed, could it really be that His life was fragile in death’s hands? Not at all. Jesus was not overcome by death. No one takes His life, but He surrendered it. Seeming to claim the life of the Son of God made death seem even more powerful. But when death grabbed the body of Jesus, death died. Death was hopelessly fragile, and when he claimed Jesus’ life, death’s impotence was displayed. His power was broken. Jesus died and destroyed death. When He rose three days later, He made a mockery of death. Seems is not is. Death seems powerful but is hopelessly fragile. The grave seems strong, but in reality has no power at all.

9 When the Risen Christ returns, seems will be done. Reality will be displayed. All the dead will rise, and eternal life with Jesus will be given to all believers. 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.

10 Young man, I say to you, arise. Live. Do not live in what seems, because what seems to be life is not really life. Live in Him who promised, “I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). Live in Him who is Life. Live in Him who has called you from death into new life in the waters of Holy Baptism. It seems like water, but it is in reality the fountain of youth, the wellspring of eternal life. Live in Him who calls Himself the Bread of Life. Live by eating the Body and drinking the Blood of the One who shattered death’s power. Live by receiving His life as He feeds you with Himself. It seems like ordinary bread and wine, at best just symbols of the absent Christ, but seems is not reality. In fact, it is the real Body of Jesus and His real Blood, the very medicine of immortality that cures—yes, cures—the decay of your flesh by joining you into the life of Him who rose from the grave. What seems to be real is fake. What seems impossible is real. You belong to Jesus, and death has no power over you or over any who belong to Him.

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

Soli Deo Gloria

Pastor Jeff Hemmer