

10th Sunday of Ordinary time

I recently read a story about a Presbyterian pastor who was leading a funeral procession from the church to the graveside service. As he drove his car in the front of the hearse and the string of vehicles filled with mourners, he temporarily forgot what he was doing and passing a supermarket along the funeral route, and he remembered that he needed to pick up some groceries and so he turned into the parking lot of the grocery store. It was only after driving up and down a few aisles of that parking lot looking for a parking spot that Rev. Killinger looked into his rear-view mirror and saw the hearse and a line of cars with headlights following him on his weaved course through that parking lot. He said that he panicked for a moment, but then he calmly turned his car back on to the road and resumed his course to the cemetery—and spent the rest of the journey trying to think of what he could say to the family of the deceased when they arrived at the graveside.

Is there anything more unexpected than an interrupted funeral?

Our lessons today from the pages of scripture report two such funerals. But in both stories, you can be sure the families of the deceased did not mind the disruption one bit. For in both of these accounts, one from the Old Testament and the other from the Gospel, the man of God interrupted the funeral to perform the ultimate miracle by the power of God, that is, to raise the corpses back from the dead and present them alive and well to their stunned families.

These two stories are similar in many ways. In both accounts, the deceased was an only child, a son, leaving behind a grieving mother who was already a widow. Is there a deeper, more unexpected, more unnatural grief than for a parent to bury a child? I can't think of any.

But in addition to this staggering grief, the mothers in both of these Biblical accounts would be left with no family at all, and with no one to provide for them for the rest of their days.

This was a day before social security or government funded nursing care. Without a husband, and now without an adult child, these widows were totally on their own. So theirs was a double grief—the loss of their only remaining family member, an only son, and the loss of their only source of income and provision for their future. The heartache here is unspeakable, so profound that it spills over into the heart of the prophet Elijah and the heart of Jesus.

In both accounts, the man of God meets the widow at the gate of the city where the widow and her son live. By touching a corpse, both Elijah and Jesus risked becoming ceremonially unclean—a taboo in that society. In both stories, after the son is raised from the dead, the man of God hands the son back to his mother. And in both stories, the response from the witnesses is one of awe and praise. In truth, no one expects, or even hopes, for someone to come back from the dead. And yet on these two occasions, death did not get the last word. God answered an unspoken, unconscious prayer that was not even uttered or thought of because it was too preposterous even to pray for such a miracle. How's that for an interrupted funeral? But here the two stories go their separate ways.

In the gospel story found in St. Luke's account of the life of Jesus, it is Jesus who takes the initiative when he and his disciples meet the funeral at the gates of the city. The grieving widow does not ask Jesus for a miracle, to raise her son, or to increase her savings account. She probably doesn't even see him, or recognize him and she certainly doesn't say anything to him. Jesus and his entourage are heading into the city and the funeral is headed out of the city. Jesus could have

simply moved the side of the road and let the funeral pass. Perhaps this story is of interest to us because one day we will be the one carried to our resting place. And as John Donne famously wrote: Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee-- that bell will toll for me.

When someone dies young, we tend to believe that life can be so unfair; after all, why do bad things happen to good people? We lament that they are gone, but gone from my sight that is all. They have taken a short cut to heaven and will not have to face the ups and downs of life, the disappointments in life; yes they are gone from my sight, but now they are in the tender strong arms of a loving God. A friend who gave up his life on a cross so that we too could enjoy the loving relationships in heaven.

But what do we feel when someone dies in the prime of life? We feel cheated. We feel cheated from future experiences that will not be. For many, grief brings with it a physical pain, a gnawing feeling within that can only be described as a sense of emptiness, a sense of loss; and too often, when death visits, we are tempted to only focus on what we have lost. But with the pain comes recollections of good times together. To me, it would be far sadder if such fond memories did not exist, especially if there was no real sense of loss at the passing of someone who no one mourns. The saddest funeral that I was a part of was when a 65 year old man only had 3 people attend his funeral. After all those years and only 3 to take the trouble to mourn his passing and he lived in a small town where everyone knew each other.

And then we come to a more elderly age; in truly sacramental marriages, there is such incredible pain experienced by the remaining spouse. A life time of memories that are no more. It is said that most important marking that you will have in your life is the dash that exists on your tombstone of the date of one's birth to the date of one's death.

In the musical play Rent (loosely based upon the opera La Bohème by Puccini) a group of friends wonder: How do you measure the life of a man?

They sing: 525,600 , 525,600 moments so dear;

525,600 minutes—how do you measure, measure a year?

In daylights, in sunsets, in midnight's, in cups of coffee?

IN 525,600 MINUTES—HOW DO YOU MEASURE, MEASURE A YEAR? It is sobering to try to reduce a year in the life of a human to the cold numbers of so many minutes and so then, how do we measure a year in our lives? For some, there is a tendency to look first at numbers: income, net worth, portfolio value, profit and loss. But our lives can't be simply reduced to mere numbers; certainly, there is something more to be added? What life is really about is how loving we are. How caring we are for those in need?

I once read a story about a rabbi who had a wise wife and 2 wonderful children; one day, his 2 children died and his wife did not know how to break the news to her husband who had been away. Upon his return, she asked: Dearest husband, I have a question. Some time ago, a friend gave me some beautiful jewels to keep for him and today he asked for them back. I have had the jewels for some time now and come to love them as my own. Her husband replied: dear wife, why are you asking me such a question? Of course you must return the jewels without hesitation. The wife then led him to the room where their two children lay dead. These are the jewels I must return. You understand that the wife managed to see, even in her grief, that life is, first and foremost, a gift from God, the author of all life, the maker of everything that is good. Isn't it like us to accept wonderful gifts from

God, often without a word of thanks, but as soon as something undesirable happens, then we question the goodness of God. True, we may not know what heaven is like, but I am reminded of a story of a man facing death who asked a strong Christian what it was going to be like. This man was a doctor who had a dog, scratching to come into his office. The doctor turned to his friend and opened the door to let his dog in, who then jumped all over the doctor. He turned to his friend and said: my dog has never been in my office, had never even seen it...but he knew that he had a friend in there and that was enough for him. And so we may not know the ins and outs of the afterlife, but it is enough that we know that we have a friend there--a friend named Jesus. We must have trust in our loving friend.

In our faith, we need to learn to accept the good with the not so good. In death, we return this life of ours to God who transforms the existence we have known into a new life into his own dwelling place. In both life and death, we belong to God. And with this thought in mind, we must again ask: what statement is my life making?

This story of the raised son is only found in Luke. It is one of only three stories in the Gospel where Jesus is described as bringing a dead person to life. The most dramatic is the story of Lazarus told in John's gospel. There is also the story of the synagogue leader's daughter, although it is not categorically certain that she had actually died. She might have just been in a coma or a catatonic state.

And so once again we must think of the woman in today's gospel who had already lost her husband and had now lost her only son and the only means of her support.

The lot of the widows in those days, often young women, was particularly difficult in a society where the married woman was no longer the responsibility of her own family and who, after the death of

a husband and a child was no longer the responsibility of her husband's family either. She was largely left to her own devices in a society where social welfare of any kind was unknown.

Jesus himself is deeply moved at her plight. At this point, for the first time, Luke refers to Jesus as "Lord," a title reserved for God himself. Jesus approaches the litter (not a coffin as we know it) carrying the dead man, tells the bearers to stop and then orders the young man to rise up. As in other similar stories, the word "rise up" is the same as that used to describe the resurrection of Jesus. Remember that it was Jesus who said: I have come so that they may have life eternal.

This story should help us to look at our own situation and see, first of all, how alive we really are. Let us look around and see how many people who need to be lifted up and helped to find new life. Maybe we can do something for them because that is our vocation in life—to leave our world a better place than when we were born.