

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, September 10, 2023**

**“When the Lord Saw Her”
Luke 7:11-17**

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As our Gospel Lesson begins, there are two competing parades approaching one another near a town called Nain: two rival crowds, each unaware of the other, draw nearer. The first is a funeral procession. Luke writes: “a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town” (v. 12).

A widow is mourning her only son. Life would have been hard for her in a society where widows were always at risk, but at least she’d had her son to support her; and now—now she has lost him, too. Not only is she left reeling from grief, but her future is suddenly uncertain, too... It was a big crowd, we’re told—one that would’ve been loud with weeping; yet in the middle of all that, surrounded by many mourners, she was in fact very much alone. This is a heartbreaking scene: there’s no hint of hope here...

But by happenstance, this funeral procession was not the only crowd in the countryside that day. There’s another crowd, out of earshot for now, but getting closer—hardly a stone’s throw geographically, but a world away emotionally. This second crowd is following Jesus, who had just done something amazing—healing someone who’d been gravely ill. So this second crowd is excited, hopeful: in Jesus, they’ve found someone who heals, who restores, who can bring joy where before there was only despair.

Luke writes: “Soon afterwards [Jesus] went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him” (v. 11). This second crowd has gathered around Jesus, excited to see what he’ll do next, what this miraculous healer might offer as an encore. In this crowd, people are sharing in the excitement: with them, there’s this rising sense of possibility—a feeling that, as long as they stick with Jesus, good things are going to happen.

And then—and then these two crowds awkwardly meet. The grieving crowd drags itself on with heavy hearts; the joyful crowd bounds along, “afoot and lighthearted”; at last, these two crowds slow down and come close. And it’s tense, uncomfortable: it’s like seeing a funeral reception and a bachelorette party double-booked for the same venue.

And, as we watch this story unfold, we wonder: Which of these two crowds will set the tone? Which mood will prevail? And really, I think we expect the grieving crowd will make the joyful crowd feel, well, uncomfortable about their celebration. If a funeral hearse and a bachelorette’s limo pull into neighbouring parking spots, we expect that the party will turn down their music; quiet the celebration; adopt a subdued, respectful tone.

So the crowds stop. There's a moment of pause. Then Jesus does three things in quick succession. First, Luke says, "the Lord saw her" (v. 13). The first thing Jesus does is he sees her: he really sees her. Jesus doesn't look away: he doesn't avert his eyes or ignore the reality of suffering (which is what we often do; who hasn't turned away from the news when it's too depressing?). Jesus doesn't do that: he looks directly at her, and sees her—not a statistic, not a social problem, not "just another widow"—he sees *her*. She receives the "total attention" (Craddock) of the Son of God.

"When the Lord saw her," Luke continues, "he had compassion for her" (v. 13). Second, Jesus is moved with pity, sympathy, compassion for her. The original language is very strong here (σπλαγχνίζομαι): the verb that we have translated as "have compassion" means "to be moved in one's innermost being." I think one paraphrased translation gets it just right: "When Jesus saw her, his heart broke" (MSG). Jesus doesn't just note her circumstances or register concern: her suffering affects him right deep down to his core, as he comes alongside this grieving, hurting human being.

And in this story, when Jesus comes alongside, he acts. First, Jesus saw her; second, Jesus had compassion for her; third, Jesus acts. Luke writes: "When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep.' Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!' The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother" (vv. 13-15).

Jesus sees suffering, feels compassion, and—out of that compassion—he acts. He begins with words of kindness and encouragement: "Do not weep," he says. Then, not content with words alone, Jesus joins his words with actions: he touches the bier (which was like a stretcher for carrying the dead), and then he does nothing less than bring life out of death. This is a foretaste of the joy of Easter yet to come: here, in the presence of Christ, death gives way to life; here, as Jesus gives the son to his mother, Jesus gives life as a gift.

These two crowds have met: one joyful, one grieving, one hopeful, one despairing. There was that tension, that uncertainty, about which crowd would prevail. But, as this story ends, there is now only one—combined—crowd. When the two crowds collided, when joy and sorrow met—they didn't land somewhere between joy and grief: they didn't take the average or split the difference. Instead, Christ's gift of life transforms the two crowds into one crowd—with a deeper, more expansive joy than anyone could have imagined. Christ's compassion uplifts everyone, creating one single celebrating crowd, praising God for grace and compassion. As Luke writes: "they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has risen among us!' and 'God has looked favourably on his people!'" (v. 16).

Today, this story, about the widow of Nain (as she's remembered)—today this story still resonates profoundly. Today, it's not hard to find that same discouraged crowd, that same funeral procession, that same weeping or grieving. It's not hard to find the widow of Nain in our world today. Right now, the widow of Nain is sheltering from missiles in Ukraine. Right now, she's grieving for loved ones in Morocco. Right now, she's keeping vigil in an ICU. Right now, we can find the widow of Nain wherever people are struggling or grieving or frightened

or worried. The widow of Nain—and that heartbroken crowd surrounding her—they still walk this world today.

And when we encounter despair and discouragement, what can we do? When the church—the crowd that still gathers around Jesus—when we meet the widow of Nain today, what else can we do but mirror—in our own way—what Christ did for her? Which was to see her, feel compassion for her, then act to make a difference.

With gratitude for Christ's kindness and compassion, we are called to try to mirror—however imperfectly—that kindness and compassion. And if we are to mirror Christ's response to suffering, we will first see those who suffer—really see them. It's much easier to turn away, turn it off, pretend not to notice, pretend not to see; but we just can't avoid seeing the struggles in our world today. Then we will allow ourselves to be moved with compassion: is there anyone who hasn't developed that defence mechanism where—when we start to feel something too deeply, start to feel moved with a heartbreaking compassion—then we shut it down, shut it off? But that's not faithful, and mirroring Christ's response to suffering means allowing ourselves to be affected by our hurting world.

And then, we will find ways to act. Christ raised a man to life again—which we cannot do—but we can act in ways that are life-giving: in our own small ways, we can bring life and hope and encouragement. What we can do really depends on who we are and what resources we have; but there's always this Christlike pattern to shape our actions. We see someone in our circle struggling through grief, we feel compassion for their struggle, and we come alongside them as a friend. We see someone overburdened by work (volunteer or paid), we feel compassion for the pressure they're under, and we step in to lighten their load. We see poverty in our communities, we feel compassion, and we support the work of Northern Hospitality. We see a disaster unfolding a half world away, we feel compassion for those in need, and we donate to Presbyterian World Service and Development.

And when we see suffering, are moved with compassion, and find ways to act, who knows what despair and struggles we, through Christ, might yet help turn toward joy. Amen.