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Propers 5 (Pentecost 3) Series C 2016

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Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 5 (Proper 5)

The Sundays after Trinity take Christian back to the basics of his or her faith. These readings unpack the core elements of what we believe and teach and confess. The theme is set by the Gospel lesson every Sunday, and the Old Testament lesson plays off that theme. The Epistle is within a semi-continuous reading from a letter and not chosen to coincide with the Gospel lesson. Today, in the Old Testament and Gospel readings, we will see two only sons raised from death and returned to their grieving mothers. One is in the days of Elijah the prophet, and the other resurrection happens when Jesus he enters the city of Nain. Being Christians, however, we assert that he did them both.

After seven weeks of Easter, you might have thought that we had explored all the themes of resurrection, but that may not be exactly what we are reading here. Yes, these readings surely speak of God's great power over death and the Christian expectation for resurrection and eternal life. If you wanted to pursue such a theme, that sermon would be an excellent sermon to preach based on these readings. If you never got around to that in Easter, go for it. God's people confess every week that we believe in the resurrection of the dead and within these verses God, through his prophet and as the incarnate Logos, raises dead people.

But these readings also speak to another essential truth about God in his relationship to people, that is the loving care he has for all his people. Our experiences with power are not helpful here. The great disappointments we have experienced in our relationships, especially with powerful people in our lives, has served to make us cynical when it comes to love. Be aware, the Devil likes that cynicism, but we also have to acknowledge that the cynicism is based on experience. Those who have the resources and the ability to work great change often are beholden to others with power and resources. The people who have access to the Senators, Congressional powerbrokers, Presidents and Governors are not often the folks of humble means and simple needs. That only makes sense. After all, the President can hardly invite every American into the White House to sit down and listen to their needs. Not even the governor of a small state can do that. In truth, the Pastor of a large congregation is not able to keep up with his parishioners. At best he has the help of staff and volunteers and the ministry of the whole congregation as the parish expresses care for its own members.

But this is not the way it is with God. He is the maker of time, he has all the time in the world. If he wants another moment to sit down with you, he can do that. If he needs six billion moments to sit down with every human being on the planet, he can make that much time. He is not bound as a creature is bound to this stream of time. That could rather change the way we think about prayer, could it not? God will make time to listen to you, right now.

Today, we see God making time for the problems of widows and grieving mothers of only sons. They are on the bottom of the socio-economic world in the ancient Middle East and they were to be found in every corner of every city in that time. For most of history they could not even own property. There was no Social Security system for them. Their husband's pension did not cut

them a monthly check. Widowed and now bereft of their sons, they would have been forced to rely upon the help of more distant relatives for the basics of food, shelter, and clothing. Often that was not forthcoming or it was meager at best. To them belonged a pitiable plight.

Yes, this is a resurrection text, but there is also a marvelous message of God's deep love for little people in this story. No one is beneath His notice. He loves his whole creation, every little corner of it.

Collect of the Day O Lord, Father of all mercy and God of all comfort, You always go before and follow after us. Grant that we may rejoice in Your gracious presence and continually be given to all good works, through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit.

God is the Father of all mercy and the God of all comfort. What a beautiful thing to say about Him. Mercy, the gift given to the undeserving, and comfort, the blessing for the person who is in great need, both come from Him.

This God, this comforting and merciful God, always goes before and after us. In the past, as we discussed this text, we thought that this sounded a lot like Exodus. It was like the pillar of cloud and fire which accompanied the people through the desert. This too is a beautiful thing to say. We never walk into a room but that God has not already prepared it for us. We never leave but that He is there mercifully to clean up our mess, to make right our wrong, to turn even our faltering and foolish words and deeds into the instruments of His comforting grace. I have never screwed up so badly that He cannot fix things, nor have I ever been able to undo his good and gracious will. He goes before me and cleans up after me.

We pray that we may rejoice in the gracious presence of God. This sounds like a silly thing to pray for, but think about it. Do we really always say "Alleluia!" because God is here? Often we think of Him as a judging presence and we don't want our words or deeds subject to His examination. God has always known about my faults. He knows them better than I do. But he still wants to be here in my life. That is faith, that is grace. God is not surprised by my moral lapses or my failures as a Christian witness in this place. He never looks at me in disgust, but always in love.

More often, I think, we are simply ignorant of his presence, or if not ignorant, at least dull to it. I have noticed something about the way folks talk about God. We have this strange notion that He is only here if we are thinking about Him. Our praise songs would "make Him present." Our prayers often invite Him in. Our TV preachers exhort us to "receive Him into our hearts." What nonsense! He has been there the whole time. It is not His presence which needs to change in answer to our prayers and songs, but His Spirit must awaken our stultified hearts.

The way I might illustrate this is to discover that I have a bank account that I had forgotten about. Suddenly I have money! In truth I had it all the time, but now I am aware of it. It is not the

case that the money stopped existing because I had forgotten about it; although, in a strange existential sense it was almost non-existent until I remembered it, especially when you consider the interest rates it is earning in my local bank! We can get so busy with the things of life we forget about God and stop rejoicing in his presence.

Back to the prayer - we pray that we be continually given to all good works. This is the result of God's presence. He is an agent for positive change in our lives, not merely some brooding, judgmental presence, nor some switched-on presence when we get around to thinking about it. He is more than just a ray of sunshine which follows us around. He simply is goodness itself. All good things flow from him. His presence in our lives, whether we acknowledge it or not, has an effect on us. It might be better if we acknowledge it, in fact I am sure that it is, but he is good whether we admit it or not.

The presence of God leads to good works done by us. There is a really interesting that happens in a number of places in the Scripture. They will speak of the presence of Christ, his incarnation, and immediately they will speak of loving one another. Check it out in I John 4, Hebrews 10, and all of Colossians, among other places. When the Bible starts talking about the incarnational presence of Christ, suddenly the expectation is that good things start happening among the people of God. Every time we say, "take and eat..." we make Christ present in the people. What do we expect to happen because we do that? Do we bless our people on Sunday with an expectation that they will leave this place and do good things, things they might not have done otherwise?

I think that the great biblical story which illustrates this is the story we had a while ago of Saul's conversion. When Saul met God "straight up" on the road, there was no Gospel in that encounter. He was blinded, he was cast down, and he was met by the judgment of God. The gospel, the healing, the restoration, all came through Ananias, the servant of God, the human being.

God has likewise prepared the way for us, just as he did for Ananias that day. He has made our words into the gracious words which accomplish his final and real goal in every situation.

Readings

I Kings 17:17-24 Since it falls right on the heels of these two famous stories of Elijah, I have include the whole of chapter 17 for us. We had the story of Elijah and this woman's encounter (vss. 1-16) last fall.

Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."² And the word of the LORD came to him:³ "Depart from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan."⁴ You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there."⁵ So he went and did according to the word of the LORD. He went and lived by the brook Cherith that is east of the Jordan.⁶ And the ravens

brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook. ⁷ And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

⁸ Then the word of the LORD came to him, ⁹ “Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” ¹⁰ So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.” ¹¹ And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” ¹² And she said, “As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.” ¹³ And Elijah said to her, “Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴ For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.’” ¹⁵ And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶ The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

¹⁷ After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill. And his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. ¹⁸ And she said 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!” ¹⁹ And he said to her, “Give me your son.” And he took him from her arms and carried him up into the upper chamber where he lodged, and laid him on his own bed. ²⁰ And he cried to the LORD, “O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?” ²¹ Then he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the LORD, “O LORD my God, let this child’s life come into him again.” ²² And the LORD listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. ²³ And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house and delivered him to his mother. And Elijah said, “See, your son lives.” ²⁴ And the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth.”

We wondered if this tied into the Exodus command to hand over the first born son to the LORD. The promise seemed to be that if they did this, redeeming the first born son, that they would live long in the land. Is this even tied to the story of Abraham and Isaac? It is a problem to speak of a guarantee that God will automatically bless. He is not a vending machine who is reacting to my actions. To posit that I have some claim on God’s blessing because I have done something right is theologically bankrupt from a Christian perspective. At the same time, we do it and at some points God seems to invite it. It is logical, after all. If you live well, God will reward us. This makes sense to us. Malachi 3 urges us to bring in the tithe and test the blessing of God. Perhaps it is not as clear as we would like to make it. Or perhaps Paul has cleared this up for us.

Both Elijah and Elisha are notable in ancient literature because the accounts of both mention women who helped them in their ministry. Readers in the ancient world could almost be forgiven for thinking that women are a modern invention. They hardly show up in most of the world's literature, and when they do they are rarely the subject of any sentences. Elisha was helped by the Shunamite woman, and God raised her son from death as well through the prophet. This woman is the widow of Zarapheth who fed Elijah, even though she had almost no food for herself and her son. God made sure that her oil and flour did not run out. We ran into this story late last year, in November to be exact, just before Christ the King.

The woman, as a widow, needed this son. This was her ticket to any hope for this life. She had been ready to die with him in the story just before this one. She would have died with him, but to lose him was even worse. Of course she was a mother and would dearly miss her child, but there is even more to this than the emotional, maternal issues. As her son, he would have an obligation to care for her. If he died, she would have no one. And so she assumes that God is punishing her, surely the prophet who is heard by God must have prayed against her, calling down some curse from God upon her head that her son has died. Why else would her son die? This initial exchange between the widow and Elijah gives us a little window in the psychology of this woman, a glimpse into what was running through her head as she picked up sticks to make that last meal in vs 12. She was blaming herself. Her son's death is her fault, her sins have brought this on them. Notice that she doesn't claim this is unfair and say that she doesn't deserve this. Her guilt is beating on her pretty hard right here.

We never have to preach the law at funerals. It is right there in front of us. This woman did not need the law, she was applying it to herself very well, brutally so. This might be a great point for the preacher to jump in. Do we still have this basic quid pro quo sort of understanding of God? Do we still like to think that if all is well, I must have done something right? If my life collapses, do we immediately like to think that it is because we have done something wrong? Or worse, if my neighbor gets cancer or has some tragedy, am I quick to look for divine justice in that? Do we look at the smoker with lung cancer and cluck our tongues and make the connection to sins and consequences?

Elijah clearly is not behind this. Like most guys, he is pretty clueless about these things. He hasn't a clue what is going on. He takes the boy in his arms and lays him on his bed. And then he prays and asks the question she is really asking as well: Why!?

He doesn't wait for an answer but he does something really strange. He stretches himself out on the lad three times and prays that God would restore the life to the child. When Elisha does this, it notes that he mimics the boy's posture, hand to hand, eye to eye, etc. This sounds really odd to a person who is used to modern medicine. In fact, it makes perfect sense to someone who is dealing with a shaman. Most world religions that have shamans seem them working through a process of congruity. Treatment is often not based in any sort of an idea that this or that will effect a cure, but that because it looks like something, because it resembles something, it

becomes that thing. Thus, the living man stretched out on the corpse is essentially looking like the corpse and the corpse like the living man, as if the life could be transferred.

I don't know why Elijah does this. Perhaps in the culture that is what healers did. Perhaps he was operating on some unrecorded command of God. But he does this strange thing. It is interesting that the editor of I Kings says that God hears the prayer. God hears the prayer, and the life is restored to the boy. He lives. It doesn't say that Elijah's actions effect the resurrection. God does that. I don't therefore recommend stretching out upon the corpse at the next funeral you conduct. At least not if you ever want to do another funeral.

How does this sound in a modern ear? Elijah's behaviors fit an ancient medical model. It is a little like Elijah had pulled out a stethoscope or a defibrillator and then shocked the kid. He prescribed some medication and said a prayer. God answered the prayer. Culturally we expect healing to come in such a different way, but it appears that this is the way that healing was expected in the ancient world. Jesus does the same thing, spitting and making mud and spreading on the eyes of at least one blind man, sticking his finger in the ears of the deaf, touching the lepers, etc. He too sometimes looks like a bit of a shaman. Why does he do this? How much of our theology and practice are expressions of culture? What do we think of that, what do we say about that? What do we do about that? The modern American reader is often unable to discern what an element of the culture is and what is theology here. We tend to think with our cultural lens, not about it.

The words of the woman are also interesting and worthy of note here. Don't we want her words to be said after every sermon? She had already seen a miracle, the never ending flour and oil. But now she knows that God's word is in Elijah's mouth and it is the word of truth. Does this mean she knew this before but now she knows it better? She wasn't sure before but now she is? What exactly has changed with this miracle? Is this a difference between the knowledge of assent, and the trust which is of the heart?

Psalm 30

I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up
and have not let my foes rejoice over me.

² O LORD my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me.

³ O LORD, you have brought up my soul from Sheol;
you restored me to life from among those who go down to the pit.

⁴ Sing praises to the LORD, O you his saints,
and give thanks to his holy name.

⁵ For his anger is but for a moment,
and his favor is for a lifetime.

Weeping may tarry for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.

⁶ As for me, I said in my prosperity,
“I shall never be moved.”

⁷ By your favor, O LORD,
you made my mountain stand strong;
you hid your face;
I was dismayed.

⁸ To you, O LORD, I cry,
and to the Lord I plead for mercy:

⁹ “What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it tell of your faithfulness?

¹⁰ Hear, O LORD, and be merciful to me!
O LORD, be my helper!”

¹¹ You have turned for me my mourning into dancing;
you have loosed my sackcloth
and clothed me with gladness,

¹² that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent.
O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever!

This a great psalm. Attributed to David, it is really the posture of the hearer which these texts want us to assume. David is expressing the sort of thing we will want our hearers to feel and experience this day.

If you are attracted to it, read it for its emotional content.

Vss. 1-3 The Psalmist is jubilantly grateful. The LORD has rescued him from a close call with death. He has been pulled out of the pit of Sheol.

Vss. 4-5 The Psalmist turns to the world and exhorts them to praise God and live in wisdom. God’s wrath is not the final word. Dwell in hope – praise God. His mercy will come.

Vss. 6-7 The Psalmist recounts his narrative. He was doing well. God had made him strong, but he is also proud and vain. He says that he shall never be moved. But all God did was hide his face and he was cast down, dismayed.

Vss. 8-10 The Psalmist in misery offers up a penitential cry for mercy. He sees the grave looming before him and he is terrified. The dead cannot praise God. He has been relying on himself, but no more. He will tell of God’s faithfulness, but in order to do that, he must have life.

Vss. 11-12 The Psalmist is restored – back to the beginning of the psalm. The LORD has turned the mourning into gladness. He will live out the vow made in his distress. He will tell of the LORD's faithfulness forevermore.

Applied to the woman in the story, this is exactly what you might think of as her retelling of the events which the I Kings narrates to us, but through an emotional lens. The emotions are certainly one way into the life of the human being. We sometimes are far too intellectual. Is it time for a sermon which asks us to feel?

Galatians 1:11-24

¹¹ For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. ¹² For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹³ For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴ And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. ¹⁵ But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, ¹⁶ was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

¹⁸ Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. ²⁰ (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) ²¹ Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. ²² And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. ²³ They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." ²⁴ And they glorified God because of me.

There is a funny scandal about God's grace that takes two distinct forms. Some of us will be scandalized by God's love for the terrible sinner. This rather results in an attitude like that of the Pharisees who could not abide by Jesus' eating at the same table with the sinners and tax collectors. But while such pharisaical ideas are easy enough to critique, the other scandal of grace is harder to wrestle with, even though it is connected. Quite often I have found that the person who is scandalized by the love of God for the sinners of the world is also somewhat scandalized by the love of God for himself or herself.

This sort of a sinner has thoroughly imbibed and inwardly processed the words of the confession: I a poor, miserable sinner.... These words are true, they are honest, but the love God graciously realized in the cross of Jesus also means they apply to the sinner and not the saint. We have been conditioned to avoid the sin of pride and self-righteousness, so we just keep running back and forth over those words, "I am a poor, miserable sinner..." But this honesty is really another form of a vain and proud lie. Indeed, it is an insidious lie, the worst kind, the lie which involves the half-truth. For God has also called us his precious children, holy, pure, and

perfect. There is a sense in which our persistence in the “poor, miserable sinner” language becomes an outright and outrageous denial of God’s love. He has called us something else, but we won’t admit it. He has called us holy, precious, and pure.

We are scandalized at the very thought that we might be honestly called “perfect.” We retort, “I know that I am a sinner!” And that knowledge is true, but it is not complete. God has called us all saints, holy, righteous, perfect people. If we persist in drowning out his word of our perfection, is that really honesty? Is that really the truth? Is that really faith?

We have to remember that the goal here is that the people praised God because of me. It is terribly easy for us to turn this sort of a theology into self-aggrandizement. That is why we don’t lose the need to own up to our sinfulness as well. But if we do so to the exclusion of our righteousness, we have turned God into a liar. He called me righteous, but I am not really so? That is a problem.

It would have been so much easier for Paul himself to admit his sin and be done. But Jesus called him an ambassador, a messenger to the gentiles. Paul has heard that statement and owns it. It is also just as true as the description of him as a persecutor of Jesus. The gracious words of Jesus will define Paul’s life. His gracious words to us define our lives too.

Paul was a sinner, a sinner of the first rank. He admits as much. He was progressing in a destructive religious zeal beyond that of his countrymen. Not only was he a sinner, he was good at it. He was persecuting the truth. So far the sinner in me is on board with this. Like me, Paul is a sinner. But Paul also speaks the other side of that equation, the side which we so often struggle to own “God called me to preach the very Christ I had persecuted.” Can you imagine what that took on his part? Yes, of course he had to admit that he was wrong in the first place. That is hard enough. But it would have been one thing to admit a mistake and enter a discreet retirement in the family estate near Tarsus, but God is not content with this and therefore neither is Paul. He owns what Jesus has said about him and becomes the preacher of all preachers to the Gentiles. He ends up writing a quarter of the New Testament and having thousands of parishes named after him. I don’t see Paul in some false humility urging them to name them “Christ Lutheran” or something like that. He delights that they are saying “The one who used to persecute us is now preaching the very faith he sought to destroy.” He would see that as appropriate and God would be glorified.

And herein perhaps lies the brutal Law and the real problem we have with all this. We are loath to give God the credit. We somehow imagine that if he just notices all our groveling then we will be in, but what foolishness on our part. We are already in. Christ has made us so. Our righteousness, the righteousness which is perfect and holy and good and which we have received from Christ needs to shine out in our lives. The freedom which is ours in Christ is not a matter of some intellectual conversation or assent, but it is a life which we live. Paul “owns” what God has said about him. This persecutor is now the proclaimer of the very faith he once sought to destroy. That story in itself is a potent one, made more so by the fact that Paul pursues this new

vocation with just as much zeal as he ever did the old one. A white hot persecutor has become a white hot believer.

And us? God has called us by the Gospel, enlightened us with his gifts, sanctified and kept us in the truth faith. Do we not deny all that work when mope about in perpetual penitence? When all we consider is our sinfulness and never the righteousness which Christ has imparted to us, is it any wonder that we are gloomy and out of step with this generation? They too are aware of their sins, but look at us and see no hopeful future. I am aware they will not use the language of sin, but they will speak of ecological failures, our moral failures, our sicknesses, and social problems. These are just other words for sins, let them have this vocabulary and impart it with the theological meaning it should have. But they will never listen to us if our lives are simply a persistent denial of Christ's activity. "I am a sinner" is true, but it can only be the first, even the smaller part of our proclamation. I am also a saint, a forgiven child of God empowered by Him to announce his kingdom to this place and be an instrument of His grace to you!

Luke 7:11-17 (The widow of Nain's son is raised)

¹¹ 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.

There are a number of things worth noting in this text. First of all notice the two crowds. Like two rivers they converge. One is happy, the other is mourning. Our expectation is that the joy of the joyous crowd will be turned to sorrow when it confronts death. But this is not so. The grief is turned to joy, even when the grief was over such an implacable sorrow as death. Jesus made the difference here. Both streams are being led by young men, Jesus leads the joyful crowd and the corpse of the young dead man leads the mourners. It is in these two meeting that we see the real work of Christ who turns our mourning and grief into joy. Even when he confronts death and the sorrow which it engenders, Jesus is not cowed.

How different this is for us. In my experience, all my human joy must retreat before death. It has a hold on me which I cannot break. But not so for Jesus! Jesus touches the bier, addresses the lifeless corpse, and punches a hole in death's gullet. The dead man is raised and given back to his mother and the people's sorrow is turned to amazement and joyful praises rendered to God. Normally when we encounter a funeral procession, we either join in or we at least utter a prayer for the family of the deceased. But when Jesus encounters this funeral procession the corpse is the one who is changed, not him.

But as we noted in the opening essay, the real story here might be the compassion of Christ. He sees this woman and her plight and he has compassion on her. The word is that marvelous word for “his guts were wrenched.” This hit Jesus hard. He tells her not to weep, normally the cruelest thing you can tell a grieving person. But when Jesus says “don’t cry,” it means something. He backs up his words. He came up and touched the bier, the device the local men used to carry the corpse lest they touch the dead body. By touching the bier, Jesus renders himself ceremonially unclean. He is bursting through a number of boundaries in this text. He starts talking to the corpse. If you have ever tried this, you know that this does not work. Corpses are singularly successful in ignoring you. Unless, of course, you are Jesus.

The young man sits up, starts talking. I wonder what he said. Notice too what Luke tells us next. Jesus gives the young man back to his mother. You might also want to simply play on the differences here between Jesus and the great prophet Elijah. Elijah was considered the pinnacle of the prophetic band. He would ascend to heaven in a whirlwind and chariot of fire. But he must ask God to restore the life of the child. Jesus asks no one. He does not seem to have any need for any help in this matter. He simply commands and even the dead obey. Jesus is greater than the prophet! In truth, the preacher will assert, it was Jesus who gave the child back to the mother in Elijah’s day as well.

But again, I would think that it is the compassion of Christ which we want to hold in center stage. The crowd’s reaction is another place to consider, however. Seized by fear they praise God and the story of Jesus spreads. They are amazed at his compassionate and merciful deed (see the collect!)

This text could be unpacked from a variety of angles:

- 1. From the angle of the widow. What was it like to walk out of town grieving and returning in joy? (can the Psalm help us here?)*
- 2. From the angle of one of the people who walked out with her – we went out to cry and came home laughing.*
- 3. From the angle of one of the people in Jesus crowd. We should have joined them in their grief but we ended up all laughing together.*
- 4. From the angle of the young man – carried out dead, carried back as a sign and wonder from the LORD.*
- 5. From the angle of Jesus – with compassion he sees this whole scene and acts upon that compassion. He speaks to dead bodies and they listen.*

Law and Gospel

- 1. The women in the story have dead sons, sons whose care for them is terribly important to their wellbeing, and whom they love. They are crushed by this tragedy. God hears their cries, sees their tears, and God helps them.**

2. We also might be tempted to think that, like these women once thought, we have no help. We are, after all, not terribly important people in the eyes of the world. But God sees things differently than we do. He works things differently, and he is able to make us the center of his attention and he does that. He comes to our aid. He may not raise the dead loved one for us, but he will put into our lives the help and loved ones that we need.
3. But death just hurts so much! Jesus raises the dead young men and gives them back to their mother. He also will give us back our loved ones in the great resurrection of the dead of which these two events are but foreshadowing.
4. This is about more than just death. Our whole lives seem to be caught in an inexorable, relentless stream of misfortune which only ends in death, the capstone of a brutal existence. Jesus and his stream of life comes into our lives and transforms our grief into joy and gives peace to our troubled hearts.
5. God's words to me are hard to believe. He has called me his child in Baptism. He has empowered my forgiveness with the very potency of heaven. When I return to my seat after this supper it is with Jesus within me. Christ himself, God himself, dwells in my heart and I with him. It is so much easier to assume that these are just symbols, nice platitudes which should encourage me to do better, but really don't. Yet, God means those words, every syllable. They are true of me, just as surely as my words of confession to him are truth, indeed, they are more true.

Sermon Ideas

1. And he had compassion on her... (Luke 7 – Jesus has time for the little people, the grieving widow, the poor man, the powerless, and the rest of the folks whom the world does not see. This sermon wants every hearer to believe that, to take heart, and face this life with much more confidence, hope, and even joy.)

The word for compassion here is worthy of attention. The Greek work is “splangchnizo” notable because it has five consonants in a row and for its meaning. The word speaks of the entrails, the guts. Jesus saw this woman and it was a like a punch to his gut. It hurt him to see her. His innards were wrenched. This is a powerful word to describe what is happening to Jesus and Luke wants you to perceive that Jesus is compassionately approaching this woman. He cares about her.

In the ancient near east the poor widow was really in a difficult situation. Her husband was dead, now her only son was dead as well. She might not have been able to own the house she lived in. Who would take care of her? If you do nursing home visits you get the idea that this was far more than just an economic problem for her. She was alone, dependent upon the extended family that may or may not come to see her. We have all

seen these little old people in our nursing homes and care facilities. They sit and look out the window hoping someone will come to see them; often their hope is in vain.

This is a sermon which notices such little people, even me, and asserts that God cares for them. Such people are never too small so that they are beneath his notice. God has a thing for little people, be it children, or helpless old people who can do nothing but sit all day and watch the world go by them. He notices the drug addict and the peasant in North Korea who is starving. He notices the Chinese factory laborer who makes our shoes and the Latino who picks our strawberries. He sees them all. He has time for them all. This is not the benevolence of some distant king who sees us in abstract and loves us. He loves that guy, the one over there, in the hat, with the faded t-shirt and the shoes with the holes on the side. Notice how Luke sets this in the midst of a crowd, not one crowd but two. There are lots of people here, there are joyful people, there are mourning people, lots of distractions; but Jesus sees this woman, her grief, her plight. Jesus is moved by her. In the middle of all that crowd, Jesus has eyes for her a woman his society would soon discard.

Luke tells this story beautifully. I envision two great streams merging, one of joyful folks with Jesus and the other grieving people from Nain. Both are led by young men. One is life itself, the other is dead and the way to the cemetery. We would expect the joy to give way before the sorrow, but Jesus is here and that puts everything in flux, even death must give way before him.

Jesus pulls out all the stops for this woman. This is not just a benefit pancake breakfast down at the local Elks club. This is a resurrection – the rock stars are coming to hold the benefit concert, there are phone banks of folks standing by ready to receive donations, etc.

The law in all this is the message that we are anonymous, faceless sufferers on a suffering planet of people. The world tells me over and over again that I really don't matter and we are very good at listening to that. In truth, in the greater scheme of things, in a world of seven billion people, my problems are miniscule, but not to God. Our problems are not so great that they merit the attention of the rich and famous. No one will do a benefit pancake breakfast for me because my car did not start this morning or because my knee hurts. No rock star will raise funds for our church. But God, the almighty and eternal God, makes the moment to spend with me, to hear my prayers, no matter how petty, and to love me. Because Jesus has come in the flesh, my flesh, my real life is important to God. The hearer should hear and be able to believe that the Lord Jesus has his eyes firmly fixed on them.

The end of this story is also interesting. Like the woman in the OT story, the people of joy and the people of sorrow are all united in one voice praising this Jesus of Nazareth who speaks to the dead people and the dead people sit up and start talking. God's vision on us also has an effect upon us.

The preacher may want to draw some comparison between Jesus and Elijah as well. Elijah prayed and God answered, Jesus just starts talking to the dead guy. He is more than a prophet.

2. Set Apart Before I Was Born (Epistle Series – That the Holy Spirit would give the hearer to see the gracious work of God in his/her life, rejoice in it, and become a gracious person on that account.)

Last week we preached about the passion of Paul for the Gospel. He was willing to get angry about this. One reason this was so important to him was that this was not some theological abstraction, it was very personal for him. This week he tells a little of that story. The preacher will want to remind the congregation of the story of Paul. But the real goal here is to get the hearer to see, believe, and trust that this is not just the story of a man who lived and died twenty centuries ago. This is our story. This is my story.

This sermon would have the person who hears this message have something of that same passion as we heard in Paul last week. That is only going to happen when we see that God has been just as gracious to us as he was to Paul. God grace brought Paul to such passion. That same grace will give us that same passion.

To do that, we will want to walk that same path. This can be a challenge. We are not all persecutors of God's people, zealously pursuing Judaism in ways which exceeded even the most zealous of our Jewish co-religionists. We are most likely rather bland, run-of-the-mill sinners who have not got some dramatic story to tell which involves prison, addiction, or nefarious deeds. Our sins tend to be the petty jealousies, hurt feelings, and occasional speeding ticket. Most of us have never been hardened, calloused sinners, but tend to be the sorts of folks who can be sent into paroxysms of guilt by any unsubstantiated accusation. (I didn't do it but I still feel bad!)

Too often we like to say that we don't have what it takes to do what Paul did. But in fact, we do have what it takes. We have God's love and grace. That is what made Paul such a passionate person for this Gospel. That same love and grace has been shown to us in our Baptisms and in every meal we eat here. Jesus is not just giving this to Paul, but to us too.

The wise preacher will realize that petty sin is just as deadly as anything done by the top-flight scoundrel. Being at the back of a line marching in the wrong direction still results in getting to the wrong place. What is more, the very bland nature of our sins has a way of lulling us into thinking they are not so bad. We don't need the gracious God, just one who understands that we are prone to an occasional lapse. We have rather lost the sense that sin and holiness do not mix well, even when those sins seem rather small and insignificant compared to Paul's persecution.

Here I think the psalmist can help us. His position was secure, he was doing well, but that was all cast down when the relationship with God was broken (God hid his face). I think

the psalmist speaks to the feeling of insecurity which many people have today. We look to the future and wonder if Social Security is going to be there. We wonder if our job will even exist in a few years or will a robot be doing it. We look to the housing market and wonder if another bubble will burst and destroy the value we have carefully built. We look to our health and hear about Zika viruses and the woman who has the antibiotic resistant infection in New Jersey and wonder if we are next. The psalmist doesn't seem to have committed some terrible sin except to forget that all this blessing was from God. That sounds a little more like us. But the turn around, the change, was just as dramatic as what happened to Paul.

The preacher will want to take the next steps as well. The psalmist turns to his fellow human being and exhorts them to join him in praising God. Saul of Tarsus becomes Paul the Apostle. The graciousness of God has a way of doing that to us. It makes us gracious too. The forgiven sinner – now a saint in Christ – does not look at the sinner down the road with loathing, but sees another human being caught in the same trap, the same death, as I was. Evangelism really is one beggar telling another where to find a hot meal.

This really is our story. It is something that takes shape in our lives. Our lives of petty sin are just as much a problem as Saul's persecution. But God's grace shown to Saul is also shown to us. Baptismal water and Eucharistic blessings are freely given. Absolution is proclaimed. God's love has no strainer which prevents the really big sins or the little ones from excluding us. He loves you despite you. It is with eyes transformed by his love that we now can look out on a sinful world.

If this is not working for you, try the next sermon!

3. They glorified God because of me (Epistle - That the Holy Spirit of God would convict the hearer of righteousness in Christ and the freedom which is ours as a result.)

Wouldn't this sermon title be exactly what we want on our tombstones?

Paul's sketchy past is the key to the story. God did not seek out and call Saul of Tarsus because he had gotten anything right, or because he had good intentions. He was a persecutor of the Church and thoroughly working at cross purposes to Christ. But that did not stop Jesus who graciously revealed himself to Paul. This is the funny thing about Grace, it is so alien to our thoughts that we would never get there by ourselves. Who would have thought Saul of Tarsus could become Paul the Apostle. Paul's very life story is a testament to the validity of the gracious call. This is not from men, we would never do this. It must be from God and it rebounds to his glory.

Have you ever watched a New Orleans Jazz funeral? It somberly walks to the cemetery with doleful music playing, the body is interred and the preacher speaks words of comfort. The return from the cemetery, buoyed by that hope, is joyful. The musicians play wonderful music of happiness and joy. This sermon notices the two crowds of

people in the Gospel reading, one glad and festive, the other sad and wailing. Like two rivers they converge on one another and meet. Our expectation is that joy is turned to sadness in the face of the inexorable reality of death. Death is just so cruel, so relentless, and so real. You cannot escape it. The grief must surely overcome the joy.

But look at the Gospel reading today: contrary to our expectations, the crowd that left mourning, encountered the joyful crowd and was transformed by the experience into a joyful crowd. What made the difference? It was of course Jesus. He is the catalyst of joy. The death which caused their sorrow is not the insurmountable foe which would hold us in its clutches. He has overcome and he continues to overcome.

Our sin holds us in its clutches. It governs our lives, it destroys us one day at a time. It is honest for us to grieve and lament this. It is honest for us to admit it and repent of it. But this can hardly be the end of the story, not when Jesus is involved.

Look also at Paul's life. That story is really the same story we see in the Gospel reading. He was a man so thoroughly in the grips of sin you would never have imagined he could be freed or that Jesus would want to free him, even if Jesus could free him. Paul thought Jesus was a heretic leader of heretics. But Jesus can imagine quite a lot, met him on the road, turned him around, and Saul the persecutor became Paul the preacher and the people glorified God for it.

Likewise God has encountered us in baptism, in sacrament, in word, in community, in absolution and promise. Each time he hears our penitence he responds with a solemn declaration of our innocence. At every funeral he proclaims life. You might bring in the Gospel reading to suggest that this is not an idle proclamation on his part. To every sorrow he brings joy. Would it not have been silly for the members of that funeral procession to continue out to the grave with the empty bier and grieve the now raised widow's son? Of course. And it would have been equally silly for Paul to go around the rest of his life paralyzed and incapacitated by the guilt of what he had done. Christ had set him free and made him a preacher of Jesus.

We are like that woman in the OT reading. She has the prophet in her house, feeding her with a miracle every day, but when her son dies, her sins rear up before her eyes and that is all that she can see. His death must be her fault. She cannot see the grace of God until Elijah gives her the little boy back alive. We find it so hard to let go of our past and the guilt we feel. How many people, especially young people refuse to come to worship because they feel their guilt to the exclusion of anything else? How many divorcees stop worshipping for the same reason? God would declare them righteous in every absolution, but their guilt has them terrified.

Every Sunday when we confess our sins, the preacher turns about and pronounces another truth about us – the absolution: Sin forgiven. It would be foolish for us forget that

we are sinners, but it would be equally foolish for us to ignore what Christ has said to sinners.

We are free – like Paul was free to become the great apostle to the Gentiles, like the woman in the Gospel was free to go home and make dinner for her son, like the widow of Zeraphath was free to embrace her little boy and hear once more how his day at school had been. We are free!

4. God's word of Encouragement to _____ Lutheran Church: (That the hearers would believe that Jesus sees their condition, loves them, is working on their behalf, and the solutions to their issues lies in his hands.)

We crafted this three years ago for parishes which are hurting from a dwindling attendance, the fiscal realities that attend that, and the discouragement which oppresses them because their congregations are not growing, not thriving, not what they want them to be.

Such congregations look a little like the widow in the Gospel lesson today. They see a dismal future, their situation is bleak, the finances especially are really a problem, but also they grieve for the ones they have lost. This will not be a hard picture to paint in either situation.

The widow, however, has a little advantage over us. Facing the death of her husband and son, she knows that she is helpless before it. We often like to think that we need to fix these issues, that the burden of building this congregation lies with me, us, the preacher, and the program.

The widow knows better. She cannot raise her dead son, so all she can do is grieve. But there is one who can and he meets her on that road to the cemetery, he sees her plight and he has pity upon her. He speaks to the corpse, and amazingly, unexpectedly, it works. She is freed from her worries and her son is restored to her.

We believe in, follow, and serve that same Jesus. He also sees us, our plight, our situation. He sees the financial realities of our congregation. He sees the grief in our hearts for the people who are not here, who have died and otherwise left us. He looks upon us with the same compassion and even speaks to the dead.

I cannot tell you exactly what this will look like. But I can speak to you that this promise means we can look at this situation with hope and joyful expectation at what God will accomplish. It might not be what we expect. I know a congregation which was dying and soon was transformed into an ethnically diverse place. Soon the old Germans were worshiping with African Americans. We know of another place whose ministry was transformed by African emigrants, and recently they ceded leadership to the Liberian community which now surrounded them. Is it the end of the world if our congregation closes and our building becomes the place for another community of believers? Does that

mean that God has left or that our ministry has been a failure? Hardly. It is changed, different, and perhaps not what we prayed for, but it is still a Godly thing.

Corpses are usually the last people you expect him to bring to you. The woman probably thought her only hope lay in some male relative who would have pity on her, take her in, and provide for her. Instead she got what she was not expecting. We often try to define for God the sort of help we want and the answer to our prayers. But the God who speaks to corpses might well surprise us and deliver to us succor from a completely unexpected corner.