

Pr. Franklin Wilson
Luther Memorial Church
1 Kings 17. 17-24; Psalm
Galatians 1.11-24; St. Luke 7.11-17

“The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived.”

“they only heard it said, ‘The one who was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.’ And they glorified God because of me.”

“The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.”

Second Sunday after Pentecost June 6, 2010

Last Sunday, Pr. Pohlman proclaimed the Holy Trinity in incarnate terms—the spirituality of material things, the living presence of God in the stuff of daily life. The Trinity contradicts our tendency to clean up God and reduce the Divine to what is understandable, manageable, and safe. The Trinity anchors the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit within the mess and muck of creation.

Today’s readings bear that out. In the First Lesson, Elijah gets mixed up with an angry widow and her dead son. In the Gospel, Jesus shows compassion for a widow and restores her dead son to life. In the Second Lesson, Paul tells of his dramatic reversal from church killer to apostle. God wrenched Paul from zealous persecution by a revelation of Jesus Christ.

We imagine that Paul would have gone straight to the other Apostles to confirm his call, and learn the apostolic ropes. Or that he might have gone to a center of religious meditation where he could have contemplated the mysterious ways of God. But, no. Paul says he went into Arabia and Damascus for three solid years. Only then did he go up to Jerusalem where he met Cephas and James for a mere fifteen days. He didn’t even *see* any other apostle; nor did he talk to any. His message derived directly from and an encounter with Christ himself—the crucified and risen Lord still mucking about with rampant sinners.

Luke 7 confirms Christ’s messy ways: Jesus and his disciples approach the gate of a city called Nain, not far from Nazareth. There they encounter a procession carrying the body of a dead man. He was the only son of a widow. The widow draws Jesus’ attention: “When he saw her, he had compassion on 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.”

Jesus acts on behalf of the widow: her loss, her grief, her utter emptiness bereft of her only son—her means of living. The account recalls the Elijah story. In both cases,

when the dead person is revived, they are *given to their mother*. Why? Because in those times, a widow without children was as good as dead. Thus, the raising of a widow's child is tantamount to *two* resurrections. A dead child restored means that the widow will also live.

Restoring dead children to widows signals the Holy Trinity's relational life. Contrary to cultural tendencies, we cannot live alone, but only in relation to others. The Father is the Father only in relation to the Son and the Spirit; this is true for each person of the Holy Trinity. As with the Trinity, so also with human beings. Thus, bereft of her child, her *relation*, the widow of 1Kings voices our operative assumption: that God has something against us; that God wants nothing more than to bring our sin to remembrance, and cause us grief. Elijah repeats that assumption as he cries to God, "O Lord my God have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" But "the Lord listened to Elijah; the life of the child came into him again," he revived, and Elijah gave him to his mother.

Flannery O'Connor notes in *A Memoir for Mary Ann*, that "Bad children are harder to endure than good ones, but they are easier to read about..." So also, as in the Bible, dead children are harder to endure than living ones, but they, too, are easier to read about. Dead children give rise to our fundamental complaint against the Divine. The voice of rebellion asserts that God doesn't help but hurts us; God doesn't care for us, but kills us. When we suffer, it's on account of God, and nothing shows this more clearly than the suffering and death of children.

Which is why God's own Son must suffer and die. Toward the end of all the Gospel stories, Jesus himself becomes the grieving Widow's dead son. Elijah plays the widow's last card—hurling the ultimate accusation against the Almighty: "Why did you bring calamity on the widow... by killing her son?" God not only listens, and restores the child's life. God plays the trump card: the Divine becomes the widow. Bereft of the only begotten Son, God acts not against us, but for us. In the death of the only Son God grieves with us, longing for resurrection.

Both Elijah and Jesus *give* the revived sons to their mothers. The stories are not told from the perspective of the dead child. The dead are not raised merely for their sake, but for their mothers, and for the sake of the whole human community. The purpose of resurrection, if we think about it, cannot be for the dead alone, but rather for those in relation to them. This is surely the case with Jesus who, raised from death, was no better or worse off in relation to God who is Lord both of the living and of the dead. But Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father *for our benefit*—not merely for his. So also, the restoration of the dead in these readings benefits not merely the dead themselves, but their mothers and the community to which they are related.

The same is true for Paul the Apostle. God appoints Paul even before he was born—not so much for Paul's sake, but for the wider community, the church. In fact, in a

material sense, Paul had a much more successful life *before* Christ was revealed to him than after. In a material sense, Paul was better off as a persecutor of the church than as an apostle. As a persecutor he put people in prison. As an Apostle he suffered loss of all things—for our sake.

This is the dynamic of Christ's life: death leads to life—not biological life for us alone, but eternal life for all. The church is not primarily informed by improved health, chronological longevity, and bigger buildings. The church is informed by suffering and faith, and renewed by the resurrection of the dead for the sake of the bereft, the widow, the weak, the lonely, and the unloved. Therein lie the true riches of eternal life—not merely a bank account, but Christ's participation in our death that we might share his eternal life. Christ transforms death into life, God becomes the widow and trumps our death by the death and resurrection of the Son, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.