

"Do Not Weep, The War's Been Won!"
+ 2 Pentecost +
1 Kings 17:17-24; Galatians 1:11-24, Luke 7:11-17
June 6, 2010

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen. The texts for this morning's message are the lessons for this day.

Have you ever heard someone say something so outrageous you hardly knew how to react? Recently I spoke to a young man who said, "I've known men and women Lutheran pastors all my life. There really isn't any difference. There are good pastors and bad pastors no matter what sex they are." I was more than startled I was speechless. When I was his age (20) there were no ordained Lutheran female pastors. The very first were entering seminaries. I would have had no reference point for the statement that he made so conclusively from his whole lifetime of experience.

Not that "women's issues" weren't a "Hot Topic" or Civil Rights, for that matter back in the early 70's, but, to be honest, when I was 20 what concerned me most was the Vietnam War. 40 years later the anti-war movement of the 60's seems to me to have been more about self-preservation than pure pacifism but the awfulness of death – the carnage on the TV during the evening news brought war home to us every night.

The awfulness of war – the painful separation of death and the miserable loss of young lives has always raised protest. Stephen Crane wrote this poem during the Civil War:

Do Not Weep, Maiden, For War Is Kind

Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind.
Because your lover threw wild hands toward the sky
And the affrighted steed ran on alone,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

Hoarse, booming drums of the regiment,
Little souls who thirst for fight,
These men were born to drill and die.
The unexplained glory flies above them,

Great is the battle-god, great, and his kingdom --
A field where a thousand corpses lie.

Do not weep, babe, for war is kind.
Because your father tumbled in the yellow trenches,
Raged at his breast, gulped and died,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

Swift blazing flag of the regiment,
Eagle with crest of red and gold,
These men were born to drill and die.
Point for them the virtue of slaughter,
Make plain to them the excellence of killing
And a field where a thousand corpses lie.

“Do not weep.” In the face of the awfulness of death those words are discordant, inappropriate – downright rude. Yet those are the words that Jesus greets the widow of Nain with when he comes across the funeral procession we heard about in the Gospel for this day from Luke.

How strange those words must have sounded to her and the other mourners, those who had lovingly washed the young man’s body after death, anointing him with strong smelling salves to keep the stink of death at bay. “Do not weep?” How cruel. This young man was his mother’s security, her future. He would have cared for her in her old age, his wife would have given her grandchildren to tend to, their home would have been hers but all that was gone. Her widow’s clothing would have given that away – and no daughter-in-law at her side. “Do not weep” – what an ill-placed greeting – like the man and his wife who came up to my Mom in the grocery store the week after my Dad’s death, took her hand and said, “Congratulations” when they meant to say “Condolences.”

But Jesus had reason to say what He did to this widow. With the glories of Trinity Sunday still ringing through this Sanctuary so filled with space and majesty the Gospel for today takes us back from the incomprehensible vastness of the being of our God to something equally as inexplicable and awe inspiring – the fact that our God sees us, has seen our condition, knows our personal needs, and embraces the very pain that rends our hearts. Think of it - the God who filled the heavens – the Son who was with the Father before the foundations of the world sees the

widow of Nain – sees her, sees her situation and what he sees wrenches him to his very core.

The Greek word indicates a knot - a gut punch feeling in the pit of one's stomach because the belief was that the intestines were the seat of strong emotion – particularly mercy & compassion. You might conclude that the widow stood out in Jesus' mind, gained His attention by her bereft isolation but perhaps, being the oldest son of His mother He noticed her because she brought Mary, His own mother, to mind and he was remembering His own responsibility to care for her the rest of her life – a responsibility He passed to the disciple John as He hung on the cross.

For those who theorize that God started things in motion and the rest is up to us this encounter tells us our God made flesh in Jesus is not a dispassionate observer of the human condition, He wasn't simply, as the crowd proclaimed "a great prophet"; He is so connected to us that when we are crushed in agony our God is right there with us, aching with and for us. It was not just the Rationalists, many of whom were who founding fathers of the United States, who saw God as being aloof and afar. Those in the Hebrew nation from the very beginning would never have thought to call God their "father" as Jesus did and instructed us to. They never spoke God's name at all, for fear of misusing it. The Romans had cruel gods who exacted revenge, toyed with them, bartered with them; ignored them, but never really loved them or felt any compassion for humans as they were lesser beings. The same was true for the Greeks, whose gods idled their time away on Mount Olympus, content to eat, drink and be merry in their own celestial country club. But Jesus had compassion: God in the flesh with a knot in His stomach over your pain and mine – the dire situation of all humanity with only death in front of us – no real present, no future, and no forever. That was what Jesus saw achingly etched on the faces of those in the funeral procession.

So Jesus said, "do not weep" not as a somewhat hollow but well-meant "don't cry your loved one is in a better place" but because He had come to conquer death: "Do Not Weep, The War Has Been Won." This was a statement only the One Who'd left the glories of heaven to die for the sins of the whole world to rise, the first-born of the dead – as all who are clothed in His righteousness will rise – this is a statement only Jesus could say with conviction and meaning. Because He won the battle of death and the grave, died and rose so that while our weeping will last but a "a day" there will be joy in the morning – joy that will never end.

But it isn't just about eternity. Jesus came with compassion in the here and now. The hope that dwells within us does not mean we do not grieve. Of course we weep because death is not kind. Death was not God's intent – God created us to have life.

Martin Luther observed that God's first and most important work is to give life. It is, to use Luther's word, God's "proper" work, beginning all the way back when God breathed life into this world and going all the way to eternity when life is all there is. In between, like that sad day in Nain, or like every one of our sad days, God is also engaged in what Luther called His "alien work." That's not E.T. work but it is a close encounter with death as God uses death and all of the ungodly forces in this world to direct us to Him and to what God does best: giving life! God continues to give life; not always so dramatically as stepping up to a funeral bier to raise a dead young man and give him back to his mother, but always and ultimately the new life, the ability to grab hold of life anew through faith in our God who is the source of all goodness and life brings us the comfort only God can give."

You see, this little Gospel lesson is not just a great story of long ago in a land faraway. With unlikely words in what had always been a definite situation it shares the sure and certain hope and promise that the One who brought the dead to life, by giving up His life into death, who dwells in our heart by the gift of faith that came to us in the water and the Word where we were raised to new life, will be the One standing at our graves to call us, not back to this broken life, but into a life brand new, eternal, untainted and unscarred by the brokenness of sin.

Our God has heard our cries, feels our pain, saves and restores us. Jesus tells us "Do Not Weep The War Has Been Won!" That is Good News we cannot keep quiet – just as the news spread from Nain that day long ago about the wonders being done by Jesus. We are not done "weeping in the night" yet, but with the psalmist (and that overjoyed mother in Nain) we look for the morning when joy not only returns, but it returns for good and forever! Amen

Now may God's peace having assured us of our deliverance from death through Jesus, His Son, raise us each day to new life in Him.