

Second Sunday after Pentecost

TWO PROCESSIONS: OF DEATH AND OF RESURRECTION

Luke 7:11-17

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

11 Soon afterwards he [Jesus] went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. 12As he approached the gate of the town, 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. 13When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep.' 14Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!' 15The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 16Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has risen among us!' and 'God has looked favorably on his people!' 17This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

DIAGNOSIS: The Procession of Death

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Carrying the Dead out of Town*

The scene is all too familiar. Death is reigning everywhere. It makes no difference if it's a great city like Jerusalem or a small town like Nain. Death reigns. Death reigns not only for the isolated man on the bier, but for everyone, systemically.

Look how all of life is organized around death, symbolized by the funeral procession (v. 12). Life is little more than managing under the reign of death and tending to its sovereign effects: widows left destitute, family members acting as pallbearers, neighbors and friends attending to the collective grief, and the whole of society working to keep death's effects, as much as possible, on the margins. Nevertheless, the reign of death is unstoppable. Funeral processions are the defining act for everyone. For you can carry the dead out of the town, but Death itself continues to reign within the town.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Weeping*

Death not only sets the agenda for the outward organization of society, but also for our inward life. Not only is the woman bereft of her son and her livelihood, but she, along with all who accompany her, are torn up inside as well. The symbol of this is the weeping (v. 13). No matter how much you may try to hide or deny that outward sign, the inward reality remains the same. In a word, that inward reality is despair, hopelessness. The funeral procession, the dispatching of the dead outside the village, doesn't really change the fact of the reign of death. On the contrary, it is simply a matter of bowing, like an inward act of servile obeisance, to the power of death.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Divine Intervention as God Forsakenness*

Above all, this funeral procession and chorus of tears is also, at least for the moment, a sign of God-forsakenness. Dare we think about the ultimate reason for death that way-as God's righteous judgment upon sinful humanity? Could the reign of death in some way also be God's intervention on our (sinful) business as usual, the reign of God exercising a systemic, lawful No in the midst of human existence? True, at this moment, and at this point in the text, there is no peep about that fact. Indeed, who would have the nerve to speak it at this point? But

note, neither is there a word of hope at this point-only despair. That silence here is ominous-and serves as a sign that divine judgment is working according to Paul's observation: seeing to it "that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God" (Rom. 3:19).

PROGNOSIS: The Procession of the Resurrection

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Divine Contravention as Compassion*

There is nothing in the town of Nain-or in the repertoire of human powers (technology, medicine, theological fabrication about the benign nature of death, etc.)-that can stop the reign of death, especially as that reign is linked to the righteous judgment of God. Only a contravening act of God will do. And that is what Jesus is all about. Notice the confrontation of the two processions: the one going out of the town (the procession of death) and the other arriving in the town (the procession of Jesus Christ). Notice how Jesus stops the process of death by his powerful touch. Notice how he overrules the march of death with his powerful word of resurrection: "I say to you, rise!" (v. 14). He is God overruling death with resurrection, God's judgment on sinners with God's mercy. Lest we think this contravention of God comes cheaply or easily, we need to remember that it comes through the cross. In the cross Christ embattles not only the reality of human sin, not only the fact of death, but the very law of God that justly puts sinners to death. There, on the cross, Christ fights for sinners, taking on their humanity, taking on their sin, taking on their death, taking on the law, and in his body, exhausting them all, bringing forth the resurrection, a new foundation upon which to found the God-human relationship.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Fearing and Glorifying God*

The effect of Christ's work in the divine economy-overruling judgment with compassion-has a corresponding and profound effect also on those whose hearts are struck by it. The text describes that effect as "fearing and glorifying" God (v. 16), in contrast to the "weeping" that preceded it. The modern reader may resonate with the effect of "glorifying" God, but "fearing God"? Luke is almost as intrigued by that word (check any concordance) as modern readers are repulsed by it. But "true fear" is not contrary to the gospel's effect. On the contrary, it is (for Luke) the flip side of "true faith," which in this text is indicated by the word "glorify." (For faith alone, as Luther notes in his work, "On the Freedom of a Christian," is the highest expression of worship or glorifying of God there is.) But why also fear? Is fear the appropriate response to power? Yes, says Luke, for that which has power-over deserves to be "feared." And, as this encounter points out, Jesus has ultimate power-over: over sin, over death, indeed, over God's law. Therefore he alone is to be "truly feared." But this fear is different from other kinds of fear because Jesus' power is different. The fear that accompanies faith in Christ is not a servile, cowering fear, but a liberated fear. That's because Jesus' power is not simply a power "over" (over sin, death and the law), but specifically power "for" sinners. Fear in the hearts of believers, then, is freedom to recognize the gravity of our sin, the terror of death, and the justice of the law, but to recognize all this in light of the greater, undeserved, power that is the compassion of Christ for us. Indeed, as our text says (v. 16), "God has looked favorably on his people!" That is, God has "shown favoritism," has given sinners something they don't and can't deserve. Fearing and glorifying God-what a marvelously, paradoxical effect the work of Christ has on the heart.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Carrying the

Gospel to the Surrounding Country

Finally, the effect of Christ's work is to place a whole new ministry or service on the shoulders of believers. "This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country" (v. 17), says our text. Believers now carry the good news of Christ into every place they venture. True, we as believers still live in the world of sin, death and judgment. We still continue to find ourselves, sometimes in the position of the weeping widow, sometimes in the position of lumbering pallbearers, sometimes in the position of bereaved townspeople, family or friends, and, yes, even, eventually, in the position of that man on the funeral bier. But we will be in those positions with a power that surpasses the power of sin, death and the law that caused us to arrive at this place. We will be there with the contravening word and promise of Christ who says "Rise!" Rise from tears to rejoicing, rise from sin to forgiveness, rise from judgment to compassion, rise from death to life. The procession of death has been overtaken by the procession of resurrection. Let that procession go forth!