

# Second Sunday after Pentecost

## LARGER THAN DEATH

Luke 7:11-17

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### Analysis by Ron Starenko

11Soon afterwards [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.

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## DIAGNOSIS: The Procession toward Death

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Already at Work from the Beginning*

Death does not belong to the end of life; it is already at work from the beginning. When a mother gives birth she suffers a loss, as the infant emerges from the womb. The child, leaving the womb, now spins toward death. And, as we move through life, all of our life passages are accompanied by losses, mini-deaths. The helpless mother in this lesson, having already lost her

husband, now having lost her son, has been defined as socially expendable, another kind of death. Each passage adds another nail to our coffins. What we carry is heavy indeed (v. 12).

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Burying Us in Sorrow and Pain***

As this funeral procession moves slowly out of town toward some desolate graveyard, the mourners, somber, silent, in helpless sorrow, provide a pitiful scene. If we are honest with ourselves, we, too, have been there, burdened with feelings of guilt and anger on one level, feelings of doubt, fear, and hopelessness on another. At such times when our world seems to come to a dead stop, we are buried in a kind of grave, isolated and lost. At such moments we also experience the silence, if not the absence of God, as the human spirit struggles to believe and to hope. The Psalmist wrote about his soul being in Sheol, having been “among those gone down to the Pit” (Psalm 30:3), where there is “anger” and “weeping” ( Psalm 30:5), a dying too large to bear.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Our Just Desserts***

We recoil from such trauma, not wanting to look death in the eye, much preferring to comfort ourselves with notions of death being natural, like birth, death finally being the end of suffering, death our passing to immortality. Who would dare to entertain the thought that death is a divine verdict, and that we all deserve to die (Gen. 2:17; 3:19; Rom. 6:23)? When Jesus meets this funeral procession he encounters far more than an accident of nature or a social injustice or a necessary development in our search for something timeless and immortal. He meets a power so large, so fearful, that we will do anything to deny it or evade it. Even Sigmund Freud recognized that our fear of death is so great that we will even choose it as a way to conquer it. Jesus recognized in his own wilderness temptations (Matt. 4, Mark 1, Luke 4), how the evil one, as in

Faust's experience, would lure us into death by promising to make us alive (Gen. 3). When Jesus met that funeral procession, he knew that death was a word that God had spoken over our pretentious, rebellious living, a condemning word which we are helpless to answer.

## **PROGNOSIS: The Procession into Life**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *We Receive What We Don't Deserve*

It is Jesus, however, who answers back. Paradoxically, God meets God at the gate of the town called Nain, where Jesus stops death in its tracks, where the divine verdict of bad news is reversed by a saving word. Here Jesus sends a message, a sign, good news, that divine compassion will win the day. Luke tells us, "When the Lord saw her (the helpless mother), 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" (vv. 13-15). This is the first time Luke refers to Jesus as Lord, for he is attesting that Jesus is none other than God who meets death, turning the tables, now doing a deed that is larger than death, a work that will not be completed until he, the eternal Lord, in the place of this mother, her son, the mourners, and all who die, will rise from the death of the cross, crushing the power of death in all its forms forever. There is hope for the world only when the One who is larger than death creates a new beginning for a dying world by looking "favorably on his people" (v. 16)!

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution)** : *As We Answer Back*

No wonder the crowd, including every outcast, every sinner under sentence of death (like you and me), would then respond, as Luke reports, with fear, glorifying God (v. 13). Having nowhere else

to go, and having met the One who is larger than death, the One as big as the life of God, they marvel at Jesus' power. Such recognition and response the Scriptures term "faith": the fear that we have in the presence of God who has the power to give life and take life and give life again; it is also the glory and the praise we give to the God who, in Jesus, dismantles death and returns us to the eternal Mother/Father (v. 15). Faith is where we are alive already in our believing: We are the baptized communing at the Table, people who are ourselves now larger than death, because we have been given a life as big as his.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Upbeat for the Living of Our Days***

How, then, are God's people to live when a dimension of death continues to dog our days? We might choose to protest endlessly about how unfair life is, or do our best to squeeze out of life whatever we can. We might even throw in the towel, yielding to death, glorifying it. But there is an alternative. We can walk with the faithful, our heads held high, as members of the community that follows the One who is larger than death, who is the Word of eternal life (John 5:24). We can begin to live each day, believing that God has graciously visited us in Jesus, stepping into the new life already a reality in him. We can count it a joy, like our Lord (Heb. 12:2), to be numbered among those who are not ashamed to have compassion for the marginalized, the outcasts in this world. Yes, we are people upbeat with faith and joy, for whenever we meet death and every dying experience of life, our own or that of others, we are given the vision to behold the One who stops the procession to the grave and says to us, "Do not weep...I say to you, rise!" (v.13), since the procession into new life, now underway, is as large as the life of God.