



June 6, 2010  
Second Sunday after Pentecost

*From Procession to Parade*  
Rev. Mike Gregg

**1 Kings 17:8-16; Psalm 146; Luke 7:11-17**

I have always wanted to attend a New Orleans jazz funeral. From what some of my friends have told me, it is a distinctive event that proudly encroaches upon the polarities of death. At the beginning of the funeral, the brass band and percussion would begin its solemn procession at the church, playing hymns like "In the Sweet By and By" and "Just a Closer Walk with Thee." No ornamentation, no improvisation, no flourishes, no frills. "Nothing but sadness blown low and blue to the beat of a muted snare drum."

Then, the procession arrives at the cemetery, and after the final words are spoken and the body is lowered into the ground, the mood dramatically shifts. Brilliantly bedecked umbrellas burst open, vibrant handkerchiefs are waved in the air, the snare drummer removes the mute on his drum, a second line of dancers emerges in elaborate celebration and the funeral procession heads back into town to the boisterous blowings of "What A Friend We Have In Jesus?" and "When the Saints Go Marching In." The town folks who heard the solemn hymns earlier in the day wait anxiously for the procession's return...because they know a celebration's coming...and no one in town wants to miss the funeral procession now that it is returning as a funeral parade. Do you think we could arrange for me to have a Jazz Funeral even though I'm not officially part of the "Who Dat" nation?

A New Orleans jazz funeral is an example of death meeting life... where the party of the parade accompanies the power of the solemn procession. This is the depth of life, and Jesus comes to us in the midst of our broad lives all the way from the procession to the parade. Just as

Jesus comes to us, he came to the widow of Nain. Nain, the town called “the pleasant place” wasn’t so pleasant for the woman Jesus encountered there. Not only had this woman lost her husband, her son had also passed away as well. Not only did she not have the comfort of family, but she will now be without any economic support. This funeral would not end with a party. This funeral procession will not be changing into a parade.

Good thing that when Jesus breaks into our lives that he often has to enter our distressed demonstrations and paltry processions in order to speak the words, “Don’t weep! Don’t worry, I am going to make this better for you!” Granted, when we have had loved ones die the last thing we want to hear from a religious leader or anyone for that matter is “don’t cry.” We feel our pain to the core and this family-less widow knew that she had nothing left. Yet, even if Jesus had not raised this widow’s son from the dead, which is more often the case with us, the presence of Jesus was enough for her, and for us. God was on the precipice of knowing what this woman was going through. Jesus knew that the parent-nature of God would be heartbroken when Jesus, God’s only son, would soon die.

As a minister, I hear a lot of crazy stories from my colleagues at other churches. One of my friends relayed a story of another pastor in ministry, a young man fresh out of seminary, a little wet behind the ears and green about the gills. While conducting his first graveside service, he stepped backwards, lost his balance and somehow ended up on top of the casket, which, in turn, went down into the grave under his weight. The teller of the story then proceeded to say accompanied by, of course, the laughter of others: “now, there is no graceful recovery from that! Unless, of course, you happen to bring the deceased back up with you.”

I know that none of us have seen someone raised from the dead and probably never will. But in this gospel story, that is exactly how this funeral procession would end. The son would be raised! But this is not where the miracle began. This funeral procession takes place on the heels of the account in scripture of the healing of the Centurion’s slave. The Centurion’s servant was sick almost to the point of death and Jesus healed him. The crowd that bore witness to the healing of the servant was following Jesus into Nain, in parade-like excitement because of the great miracle they had seen. As these onlookers were celebrating the life giving power of Jesus, they ran head first into the death-dealing dilemma of a funeral procession. So as these two groups meet, from procession to parade, we are meant to notice the contrast between these two life giving accounts in the Gospel of Luke.

The Centurion was a man, a Gentile, from a ruling class of society, and probably powerful. The widow was a woman, Jewish, at the bottom of society, and powerless. The Centurion’s faith was needed to move Jesus to heal, while Jesus’ own compassion moved him to raise the widow’s son. Jesus simply healed the centurion’s slave. The widow’s one and only son was raised from the dead.

So what exactly is it that we are supposed to notice? Well, the most important thing is that Jesus does not play favorites. He was willing to reach out to every spectrum of society. Like the beams of the cross, between the two thieves beside him and his mother below him, he reached out his arms to the rich and the poor; men and women; high and low, powerful and powerless; Jew, Gentile! He stretched out his arms upon the cross for all people! And he stretches out his hand again to touch the casket of the widow’s son and say “Young boy, rise up!”

Can you imagine the scene? There are two crowds approaching the gate of the city. They are coming from opposite directions and they are characterized by two entirely different moods. The crowd with Jesus is joyful and jubilant. They have seen the power of God at work in a very

mighty way. Not only has the Lord been glorified among the Jews, but even a Gentile Centurion has come to ask his help and to recognize his divine power.

The other crowd is made up of the people of Nain. They are exiting the town for a different purpose than those who are entering it. They are mourners accompanying a widow and the body of her son. They are headed for a cemetery. Leading the procession would be the women, behind them the other mourners, and finally the funeral bier, the stand or frame on which lay the body or casket. Then Jesus, out of his own compassion, decided to leave the parade to join the procession. Jesus, out of his own compassion!

I have to tell you, I got really excited about this story when I took out my Greek bible and looked up the actual word used to describe Jesus' "compassion." It is the word *splanchnisthe* (es-plang-nees-the). Granted, it sounds like someone sneezing milk out of their nose, but I was intrigued by the meaning of the term. According to my Greek dictionary this word means: one's heart, affection, love, innermost self or feelings, and ...most importantly: the word for Jesus' compassion is related to the word for entrails, perhaps best rendered in English as "the pit of the stomach."

It is this feeling that probably made Jesus' words of "don't cry" ring painfully in the widow's ears. She was probably experiencing that sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach at the loss of her only son. We have all felt the same way when hearing the debilitating news about the illness or death of a loved one. And that's how Luke describes the depth of Jesus' compassion. Jesus didn't know this poor Jewish woman yet he feels for her loss in the pit of his stomach like she was a member of his own family. That is the deep compassion of God in Christ.

That is the compassion that needs to burn into the depths of our souls when we see birds struggling to breathe as the weight of crude oil suffocates them. That is the compassion we need to share when houses fall from earthquakes and suffocate those trapped beneath. That is the compassion we should give when prejudice, anger, and hate swarm around the innocent and suffocate them in oppression. We, like Jesus, need to feel compassion in the pits of our stomachs and reach out our hands and say, "Rise up!" There might be a procession around you... it doesn't matter. Rise up! There might be a parade around you... it doesn't matter! Rise up! There is the nail-scarred hand of Jesus connecting everything in between, and as we take his hand in ours we embrace the needs of the world and we say RISE UP!

Jesus doesn't address the crowds. Jesus doesn't address the widow. Jesus reaches to the young man in the coffin and tells him to arise! Not only did he come to life, but he began to speak! He might have just said he was hungry, or thirsty. He might have asked for his mother. He might have said that he had a headache. I don't know what he said... and it's not important. What is important was the he spoke. He had a voice. Jesus relieved the suffocation of death and the young man had a voice to tell the world about the miracle of life that Jesus gave to him. Just as Jesus, the only Son of God, conquered death to bring us life, we too need to put our hands on those suffering under the suffocation of death and bring to them the life of love, the life of compassion, the life of Jesus so that they can lift their voices and shout out that "God has looked favorably on his people!"

We live in a world where a procession of daily death exits every city... where mourners beat muted snare drums and blow solemn hymns. So, every city must also have a parade of compassion that meets it at the gate where the gut wrenching love of Jesus comes to touch the broken, the hurting, the diseased, the dying, the suffocating and say, "Rise up!"

Will we lay our hands on the casket of HIV/AIDS without placing undeserved blame? Will we put our hand out to the bier carrying a child and claim that children need proper

healthcare and nutrition? Will we feel the gut-wrenching compassion for all of God's people as we join hands with the crucified Christ, bear the weight of the coffin, join in the cacophony of cries in order to bring about the parade of life that says "God has looked favorably on his people and all of creation!"

The death of the widow's only son meant abject poverty and premature death for her. The only Son of God's death means bountiful presence and abundant life for us. The Cross of Christ extends to all; to the thieves, to the disciples, to the poor, the rich; Jew, Gentile; slave in one story, son in the other, Centurion on one side, poor widow on the other... TO ALL! From procession to parade Jesus comes to us all. And in the processions and parades of life, we must go out and do the same.

Amen.