

Proper 5C  
Pentecost 2 – June 6, 2010

St. Andrew's

1 Kings 17.8-16 (17-24)  
Ps 146  
Galatians 1.11-24  
Luke 7.11-17

After our great jazz mass last week I was thinking about New Orleans style jazz funerals. I've never been to one. Have any of you? From what little I understand of them, they seem deeply symbolic and representative of our human grief as well as our Christian hope and celebration. They begin either at the home or the church and head to the cemetery as a solemn procession. Mournful hymns or dirges are played, the tempo is slow, and blues and sadness are expressed, usually at the death of a musician. None of the usual jazz improvisation is heard, just the somber melodies expressive of sorrow and loss.

Once the procession reaches the cemetery, when the final words are spoken and the body is lowered into the ground, everything changes. The music becomes more upbeat, often starting with a hymn or spiritual number played in a swinging fashion, then going into popular tunes. There is raucous music and cathartic dancing where onlookers join in to celebrate the life of the deceased. Following the band, bright umbrellas may pop open and someone might twirl a parasol or handkerchief in the air. Street dancers break into spontaneous choreography, no doubt similar to the dancing we had here on Pentecost! The time for mourning is over; the celebration of a life has begun. *When the saints go marching in* is surely one of the songs of celebration and who could stand still for that??

Unbeknownst to the widow from Nain, that must describe the events of her day. Luke's story creates a strong image of two very different processions. One is a procession of grief, sorrow and death. It's a large group of people, moving slowly, sadly, heads down, in no hurry to achieve their destination. Their music would be mournful. In that procession is a widow. Since she has lost her husband, she has been dependent on her only son to provide for her. For reasons Luke does not tell us, her son is dead. Her future is bleak and grim. She knows it. Perhaps she slows the procession down, trying to delay the inevitable moment when her son will finally be taken from her and she will be completely alone on the margin of Israelite society. All she can see in her future is darkness and despair and isolation.

From the opposite direction comes a very different procession. It is also a large crowd, filled with disciples and many other people. They are arriving from Capernaum where they have been witness to Jesus' healing of the centurion's slave. It has been a long trip of nearly 25 miles on foot; perhaps they are dirty, tired, hungry, and thirsty. But in this procession, led by Jesus, there is joy, hope, eagerness, and anticipation. The music would be swinging! There is light. And there is life.

They meet outside the city gate, the processions of opposites. This is the place where for the widow, her son's journey will reach its completion in death and burial. Luke knows, and we know, that outside a different city gate, there will be another death, one which will be transformed by resurrection. In these places of death and burial, outside Nain and Jerusalem, there will be life. The old age will become new.

Luke is intentionally paralleling another healing from the Elijah story. But unlike Elijah restoring life to the widow of Zarephath's young son, Luke's widow does not need to speak of her grief or her need at the death of her son. Jesus does not need to cry out to God asking that the son be restored. Jesus does not need to stretch himself down over the son in prophetic gymnastics to return breath to the body. Jesus needs only to speak and life is returned. He understands the gravity of this mother's situation and reaches into that grief with the gift of life. It is a story of Jesus' deep and generous compassion. The Greek word Luke chooses for compassion is *splanchnizomai* (σπλαγχνίζομαι) and he uses it only twice more in his gospel. Once when the Samaritan sees the stripped and beaten man; and when the prodigal father sees his lost son for the first time down the road. This is intense inner emotion and sympathy which accompanies mercy, writes Gregory Love. This will be much more than healing; it is resuscitation.

To the people with Jesus, and most probably to everyone present, the similarity to the story of Elijah would not be lost. Indeed, Jesus himself had retold the story earlier in Luke's gospel and met with a very different response from the crowd. They were outraged at this story about Elijah healing a Gentile and tried to drive Jesus off a cliff. THIS time, the crowd must gasp and then "glorifies him" as a prophet who is greater than even Elijah and they know that God has blessed them. Jesus gave the man back to his mother. There must have been dancing in the streets. If there was such a thing as a brass band, surely it was exuberant and the parasols were open and twirling.

Our beliefs as Christians are grounded upon this bedrock; that from death comes life. Through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, in ways which we cannot yet understand, life is restored to us even as we go down to the grave. As the psalmist writes: Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning.

We have two things in front of us today that particularly touch us as a congregation and bear witness to these scriptures. This morning we will bless the ashes of MarySue French's mother, Zofia, and commend her to God and into the blessed rest of everlasting peace. And we are acutely aware of the sudden death of our dear friend and stewardship shepherd, Carl Knirk.

Jan Holton writes that miracles in scripture can make a life of faith difficult. In tragic times, especially when life has been taken unexpectedly, we long for Jesus to show compassion, *splanchnizomai*, and provide the grand miracle that will take away our despair. We cling to a central message of the gospel: in Christ Jesus all things are possible.

But Zofia and Carl and Terri and Dick (and all those whom we see no more) will not be resuscitated. Our lives are made up of both processions. One for this life; another

transformed by the power of God for the life to come. Thanks be to God that we have both.

Bishop Rickel wrote in his blog this week, when commenting on the nature of Carl's life, that he talked with thousands of people about life planning, often preaching on Matthew 24:42, "Watch therefore for you do not know on what day the Lord will come." Carl is surely talking to us from paradise saying, I told you – be ready. Don't be afraid, just get your affairs in order. You have heard about that over the past months and are going to hear more leading up to our Legacy Recognition Sunday on July 18. There's information today in your bulletin insert and a personal story from Doug Holst with more to come in the next weeks. If Carl has taught us anything, we can see it through the way he lived and the way he died; to care and provide for his family and those things he loved including the church. Bishop Rickel writes that Carl was a great lover of jazz and so surely he is at the head of this procession, 6'4" of him twirling an umbrella.

Do these things: tell your family, your doctor and your priest your end of life wishes and write them down. Draw up or update a will. Choose a power of attorney to make decisions for you for when you cannot make them for yourself. Name and record with an attorney guardians for your children should they still be underage. Determine what will happen to your estate, whether it's \$100 or \$100K, and where it will go. Remember those things that matter to you. If you don't, who will? Even the prayer book asks that people draw up wills and when possible remember charitable causes, including the church. For we do not know on what day the Lord will come.

The widow of Nain and the widow in the Elijah story had their sons returned to them. It is usually not the case for us; at least not in this life. As the two processions of life and death met outside Nain, death was overcome and that procession was turned back. Life was given and the mourning turned into dancing. From death came life; in that moment for them, and into eternity for us. We live in the space between the two processions and Jesus steps into it with us. This is the Christian hope and this is our message: Death is no longer final. The mournful funeral procession is not the end. It will be transformed into life. The music will be joyous as Jesus leads the procession out the city gate to resurrection.

Gail Wheatley+