

† **READING FROM THE GOSPEL** Luke 7:11-17

A Compassionate God

The Rev. Tom Hagood

Sunday, June 6

I don't know how many of you ever knew the late Ralph Turner ... one of the brothers who owned A. S. Turner Funeral Home here in Decatur. I first met Ralph when I was a student in seminary next door. It was my senior year and each year he would conduct tours of the funeral home for students who attended Bob Ramey's practical ministry class.

Dr. Ramey knew that we, as ministers, would sooner or later need to know about the nuts and bolts of the funeral business if we were to be effective pastors ... and Ralph Turner was just the man to teach us. We toured his entire facility ... from the casket showroom to the embalming room. Let's just say, it was an interesting tour. Years later, I got to know Ralph again as a pastor.

Though he was in his eighties, he still went to work every day. As a matter of fact, he was still working on the day that he died a little over a year ago. He was dedicated and honest ... but there was one thing about Ralph that I dreaded. You see, as a pastor, my place in the funeral procession was to follow right behind the hearse.

Now driving through Atlanta is hard enough, but driving through rush hour traffic in a funeral procession poses another whole set of problems. That's why I always appreciate the funeral procession that uses a police escort ... those roving motorcycle cops offer a little special security, particularly when coming to major intersections.

However, even in his later years, Ralph still enjoyed driving the hearse ... and there were times when I would have to follow him from the funeral home all the way over to Westview Cemetery on the other side of Atlanta ... without a police escort.

Now a hearse comes equipped with a small siren and Ralph would drive right up to an intersection ... turn on that siren ... and push right on through ... even through the traffic red lights. Now, of course, that's legal ... he had the right away. But it seems there are a lot of drivers in this state who don't know anything about funeral procession etiquette or the law.

So I figured the safest place for me to drive was as close to Ralph's bumper as I could and hope that being in the shadow of that big hearse would protect me. Believe me ... following Ralph was always a rush. But you see, in the old days, when you saw a funeral procession approaching from the other direction, you would pull over and stop out of respect. I still do that when it's safe ... but let me tell you ... plenty of drivers out there today could care less about showing any respect to a funeral procession ... some traditions, sadly, are becoming a thing of the past.

It seems that in our gospel reading this morning, Jesus is coming down the road and approaches an oncoming funeral procession. What he says and does tell us quite clearly about the kind of God we worship. Do you pull over for a funeral procession ... or do you just drive on?

Listen with your heart to the word of the Lord from the seventh chapter of Luke, verses 7-11.

I will be reading from the New Revised Standard Version. Out of respect for the word of our Lord, please stand for the reading.

Soon afterwards (Jesus) went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As 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. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for 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.

Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!"

This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Galilee is not really that large. So when someone does something pretty spectacular ... like raise someone from the dead ... well, the word is going to spread. You see, just before Jesus and all these people head to the town called Nain, Jesus had brought back to life the slave of a Roman soldier.

This soldier ... and remember he is Roman, not Jewish ... expresses faith in the power of Jesus ... and Jesus responds by bringing his special slave back to life. So the word begins to spread. Jesus is getting lots of press coverage amongst the Galileans ... and wherever he goes, a large crowd seems to follow him.

This prophet really is pretty special. A lot of prophets have come and gone through the ages ... like Elijah and Elisha and Isaiah and Jeremiah ... those prophets were pretty special folks, too. They are revered in the Hebrew Scriptures. Even Elijah was able to raise someone from the dead ... as you heard in Sharon's reading from First Kings. But he had to work pretty hard at it ... to evoke the power of God through some pretty intense praying ...

Jesus doesn't have to do it that way. This prophet is different. So here you have Jesus and his disciples and this huge crowd of people just following them as they walk toward the city of Nain.

Now I can just imagine the upbeat feeling in this parade surrounding Jesus. "Did you hear what he did?" "I heard that he healed a paralyzed man!" "Is that so? Well I was there when he cured a leper!" "Did you hear what he told us there by the Sea of Galilee ... I've never heard such words from a prophet." The excitement keeps growing.

But then ... just as they approach the gates of Nain ... another parade approaches from the city ... a funeral procession comes toward them. And in that parade ... a widow is mourning. Her only son is dead. He was a good son ... because when he grew up he took care of his mother.

But now, there is no one else who will be able to look after her. And his death really means she will pay a double penalty ... because with the death of her son ... all of her property will go to her late husband's family. She is left with absolutely nothing. Not only does she grieve the loss of her child ... she is left with no means of support in the world.

Life is full of funeral processions ... those rituals we all take part in when we have to deal with a loss ... rituals that provide us a way to grieve when something we hold dear is taken from us. A death is one such loss ... but not the only one. There are all kinds of funeral processions happening all around us ... and we pass by them each day.

There are processions for those who have lost their jobs and suffer from the grief and strain of unemployment. There are some of you who are working, but find yourself straddled with deep debt that makes a restful night sleep something of the past ... some who even wonder if they will lose their house.

There are those whose funeral processions are quite lonely ... they live by themselves and no one seems to care much about them anymore ... and their days just pass by so slowly. There are processions for those living in broken relationships ... lives that are trapped in drug and alcohol addictions ... funeral processions for those who drift through life struggling with depression and anxiety ... abuse or trauma of some sort.

All kinds of funeral processions ... of all sizes ... some family size ... some made up of just lost individuals. So what are we supposed to do when one comes our way? Well ... if you think about it ... there are actually three things you can do when a funeral procession is coming toward you ... those times when you meet someone heading in another direction ... someone who is going through life with some kind of terrible burden.

You can choose to just ignore them. You can keep right on going and pay no attention whatsoever to what is going on in their life. Sure, they look sad ... or troubled ... or grieving ... but you really don't know what's going on ... so what difference does it make if you pull over and stop. You've got your own issues to deal with ... your own problems. Better to just keep right on rolling along. It will be too messy to get involved.

Or ... you can be a good Southerner and pull over to the side of the road. You can show respect to the widow woman. You can nod your head and recognize a friend ... or a loved one ... or even a stranger ... who has a critical problem. That way you're polite ... And you don't have to worry about any further obligations. At least it makes you feel a little better than not stopping at all.

But then I started thinking ... stopping is a nice gesture, but it certainly isn't going to do much to help the situation for the poor widow in our gospel lesson ... or help anyone else you might meet along the way. I wonder what would have happened if Jesus had just stopped, held his hand over his heart ... and then went on his way.

You see ... being empathetic is one thing ... but it certainly isn't going to change anything for someone in need. Or ... do you follow the example of Jesus. Do you remember what happened in our gospel reading?

Well, first of all, Jesus stopped. But he didn't just pull over to the side of the road and pay his respects ... he walked right into the funeral procession of the poor widow. And he went straight to her. Jesus didn't even know her. But he knew what was going on in her life. It wasn't hard to figure out. He could see her pain ... the grief in her eyes.

And Jesus was moved to compassion ... not just some simple feeling of compassion ... like, "Oh, gee, what a shame." No ... if you look at the Greek word used in this story, this type of compassion is gut-wrenching compassion ... as a matter of fact, the definition says it comes from within a person's bowels ... the place where such feelings were thought to occur. Maybe you know that kind of feeling ... when you feel such deep compassion for someone that you literally experience it in the depths of your body so that you almost shudder.

And it is the same kind of compassion ... actually the same word ... that is used to describe how the Good Samaritan felt who had compassion for the poor beaten man on the side of the road and was moved to help him ... it is the same kind of compassion felt by the father of the Prodigal Son who was moved to run

and greet his long-lost son.

That's the kind of compassion Jesus felt at that moment for that widow ... it was God's very compassion for someone suffering a great loss ... and it is the same God who still has the same kind of compassion for you and anyone else who is experiencing a terrible loss or tragedy in their lives. That's just the kind of God we worship.

Now I wish I could say that every story in our lives would end up like the widow's story ... her grown son is brought back to life. Her life is suddenly and dramatically changed from one of extreme mourning to one of great joy. Miracles like that do occur ... but most often in our lives ... the movement from pain ... despair ... addictions ... brokenness ... and grief takes a lot of time before we begin to heal and are made whole again.

But that is why Christ calls us to pay attention to each other ... to recognize when someone's life appears to be broken ... those are the times that we can allow Jesus Christ to use us ... when we allow the Holy Spirit to put ourselves compassionately in the way of someone's funeral procession and willingly enter into that person's journey ... walking with them ... remembering them ... supporting them ... maybe just sitting quietly with them ... finding resources for them ... encouraging them ... praying with them ... so that they don't walk in a lonely parade of grief and sorrow and pain ... so that they can begin the process of healing and to be made whole again.

Believe me ... God knows it's not easy work to reach out like that ... but there will be times when you, as a Christian ... can just feel the compassion deep down in your gut ... gnawing at you ... calling you to reach out ... calling you to walk right into someone else's funeral procession ... and to bring hope and love and grace back into someone's life. You'll just know it. And with the power of the Holy Spirit ... you will make a difference in someone's life.

The wonderful words of the late Henri Nouwen speak to our very souls about the compassion ... the consolation of Christ to those in need. Listen with me ... "To offer consolation ... (compassion) is one of the most important ways to care. Life is so full of pain, sadness, and loneliness that we often wonder what we can do to alleviate the immense suffering we see. We can and must offer consolation ... (compassion). We can and must console the mother who lost her child, the young person with AIDS, the family whose house burned down, the soldier who was wounded, the teenager who contemplates suicide, the old man who wonders why he should stay alive. To console does not mean to take away the pain but rather to be there and say, 'You are not alone ... I am with you. Together we can carry the burden. Do not be afraid. I am here.' That is consolation ... (that is the compassion of Christ) ... we all need to give it as well as to receive it." (Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*, February 9)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.