

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for June 6, 2010  
Lessons: I Kings 17:17-24 and Luke 7:11-17

## TWO WIDOWS AND THE REST OF US

Luke tells us Jesus restored life to the dead son, the only son, of a widow. So, the elements of grief were not only the heartaches of love and life cut short but on top of those, the realities of destitution in a society without social safety nets beyond care from family members or, perhaps, friends and incidental charity from strangers. The widow was about to bury her son and with him her last hope for even the meager financial security of ordinary people in such a small rural village. Many of the men were probably day laborers, field hands, who earned just enough for a day's food if (and only if) they were hired for a long day's work. There was no job security. There were no savings plans, no pensions, no insurance, no Social Security, no Medicare, and certainly no Medicaid or SSI. There were no emergency rooms and no public health agencies. Back then, Jesus' prayer, "Give us this day our day's bread," or, as it can also be rendered, "our bread for tomorrow," had real meaning that was very literal and existential. *God, please give me work today so my widowed mother and I will have bread to eat tomorrow. Send someone to hire me.* But now there was no man left in family to be hired any day any more.

The question, "Can God really restore life?" is not asked because it would be foolish to ask it. Having named God, without sarcasm, cynicism, or self-protecting skepticism, surely we have already acknowledged that, yes, God could restore life. Even with just our modern medical knowledge, we can sometimes resuscitate the dead; so it would seem silly to ask whether God could manage the task if God determined to do it. The Bible does not speak of what God *can do*, is capable of doing, except as necessary to reassure frightened and discouraged people who see their fears and defeats looming larger than their God. The Bible extols God's power to get things done, to keep promises, and to overcome obstacles only when the people are struggling to hold on to what is left of their faith as it slips through their fingers. In such times, they need to be reassured that, yes, God can come to their aid. But power as such, for its own sake or for some glory derived from power, is of no interest in the Bible, which bears witness, rather, to God's love and mercy and God's desire for right relationship with the covenant people and, through them, with all humanity. God's power is not in dispute. The biblical message is God's compassion, God's faithful love, God's commitment to a future with us, and (lest we forget) God's passion for justice, wholeness, and peace in the world.

In the Bible, the widow is one of a trio of figures common in human societies and commonly exploited or just neglected. They are the resident foreigner (that is, the immigrant welcome to labor but often neither compensated fairly nor accepted into the community), the widow, and the orphan. They are the three who represent all who find themselves vulnerable and powerless; they are the perennially “at-risk” in our communities. The Bible assures us God keeps special watch over them and measures human societies, not by their overall prosperity, power, or grand achievements, but by the way they provide for these three representatives of all who are especially at-risk for neglect, poverty, suffering, and exploitation. The prophets assure us, as they warned ancient Israel, God appraises a society by the well-being of its most vulnerable, not by the increased wealth, opportunities, and amusements of its richest. If God were to watch television, I guess God’s most frequently viewed show would have to be called, not, “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,” but “Lifestyles of the Poor and Unknown.”

Read the first three gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke — and you will see, if you take notice, how much of his time and effort Jesus expended on the needs of people almost no one else cared about. The question for Christians is not, “Could Jesus really resuscitate the dead?” but, “What was he doing spending his life and his God-given ministry on insignificant people in economically worthless little villages in some rural section of nowhere?” As in life and in faith, we find our answers to that question, we will be enabled by God’s word and Spirit to follow Jesus in his way.

I used the word “resuscitate” for Jesus’ restoration of life to the young man. I might have said “revitalize” which literally means to restore life that has waned. I’ll come back to that point. But I used “resuscitate” because the concept is familiar to us from modern medical practice where even patients who have clinically died are sometimes brought back to life, “on the table,” as we say, and also to distinguish resuscitation from resurrection, which is new life beyond the reach of death. This young man will die again someday. Jesus has returned him to the life which death had taken from him too soon and to the mother who needs him. This resuscitation is for the present time; resurrection is forever.

But the present time matters. An incident of grace, of God’s intervention in human pain and grief, is not just a parable of resurrection – though such a parable it may be – but an event. A very significant event for someone. And a very significant event for the onlookers, also — the people who had joined the funeral procession, who were sharing in the widow’s grief, supporting her as best they could. It is on their wonder and dawning of faith that Luke focuses the conclusion of his account: “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!’”

Will God intervene in our lives? Yes, God longs to do so, but not in some magical way that takes our lives away from us. For example (as just a tiny example), I could pray every day for God to teach me Spanish, but I would not learn any more Spanish than I know now (which is very little) unless and until I began to study it, listen to it, speak it, and immerse myself in it. God does not normally take my choices away from me or exempt me from the human processes of learning and growing. God wants me to learn to choose faithfully and is, I believe, much more concerned with the kind of person I am becoming than with the outcome itself of my latest endeavors.

I hear people say, “God told me to do such and such,” and I wonder what they mean. Whatever comes to mind as I am praying is not necessarily a message from God, let alone a directive to do this or that. To find, I need to seek. Whoever happens to call or whatever unexpected opportunity presents itself does not necessarily indicate an invitation from God to make that choice. To have the right door open, I need to knock, and I need to knock for the right reasons, because God is very much concerned with our motives, not just our successes. So, yes, I need to be alert every day for opportunities for God’s grace to be at work, for there to be something redemptive for someone, but God will not just take over and live my life for me.

I said I would come back to the word “revitalize.” The core of that word means “life.” To vitalize is to enliven, energize, quicken, infuse with vitality. To revitalize is to enliven anew life that has waned, failed, grown weak and weary, or even ceased. Jesus revitalizes people in many ways. He heals the sick, brings hope to the discouraged, welcomes home the outcast, and (here, in Luke’s account, quite literally) raises the dead. “I have come,” Jesus says in the Gospel of John, “that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

But not all energizing is in harmony with the will and purpose of God. These days we are witnesses a furious energizing that comes from fear, anger, racism, and even blind rage. Greed can energize a person. Contempt and sadism can make the heart pump faster and send the blood coursing through the body. Jealousy can make a person feel more alive even as it does its work of killing the soul. We need the right spirit, the faithful motive, the outlook that comes from the love and mercy of God.

The foreigner, the widow, and the orphan still live all around us and among us. And God still measures our best and most enthusiastic efforts in life by the condition of those most vulnerable. To God, economic recovery comes when they are enabled respectfully to live and thrive, without fear, shame, or degradation. Spiritual renewal comes when they matter in our choices. Amen.