

“Interrupting the Funeral” GPPC 6-5-16
1 Kings 17:8-24, Luke 7:11-17

This summer marks 26 years that I’ve been a pastor. As you can imagine, over that time I’ve had the great privilege of helping to lead a lot of funerals. If you figure I’ve averaged ten funerals a year (and I’m pretty sure I’ve averaged more than that), that’s 260 funerals. But I’m guessing the actual number is closer to 300.

Unlike weddings when practically anything can happen, most funerals are fairly straightforward. A few days prior to the service, family members and I sit down and talk through scripture to be read, hymns to be sung, any special music, and whether anybody else is going to speak. Will there be a reception? Before or after? Cremation? Columbarium niche? Burial in a cemetery or placement in a mausoleum? Then, whether I knew the deceased or not, I ask family members to tell me about him or her. I scribble notes as fast as I can usually for 30 minutes to an hour. It’s a great honor and it’s fascinating to learn about people in the process.

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Of course, occasionally something odd does happen at the service. I've been to a few funerals that lasted more than two hours, because well-meaning folks wouldn't stop talking. Once, during the funeral for a beloved retired pastor's wife, the elder son spoke about his mother so long that his father, seated behind him at the pulpit, gently began pushing a chair against the back of his legs to get his attention. When he continued to speak, the old pastor actually started slamming the chair against his legs until he got the message and stopped talking.

In a couple of towns where I've served, the local funeral home directors would sometimes call me to lead funerals for people who did not have a church home. To prepare for one service, I met with three adult children whose elderly mother had died. The kids loved their mom dearly and they smiled as they mentioned that at one time or another she had taken each kid aside privately and said, "You know, you were always my favorite child."

Over the years you see a lot happen with funerals. Terrible grief at our losses. Overflowing gratitude for what we've received. Smiles and laughter at human quirks and the funny stories that are shared. Healing

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for what might have been. And steadfast hope for what will be. You see a lot at funerals. But I've never seen anybody interrupt one. Nope. Once started, the funeral must go on. Right?

In chapter seven of his gospel, Luke tells us about Jesus who has a way of amazing and upsetting people around him. At the beginning of the chapter, a Roman centurion asks that Jesus heal his slave. And he does so, dialing the healing in from long distance. And the crowd is amazed.

Then this morning we see Jesus still on the move. This time he heads to the town of Nain, the famous setting of another healing, the healing of the widow's son we read about in 1 Kings 17 this morning. Jesus arrives at the town with his disciples and a large crowd. And as they all get to the gate of the town they run into another crowd also on the move. It's a funeral procession. And the man who's died is being carried out, presumably for burial. And then in just a few words, Luke gives us a glimpse of the terribly vast shadow this man's death has cast. Luke says he is his mother's "only son," and his mother is "a widow."

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One scholar says, “The implication is that he is her only child. The widow likely was supported by her son, and his death puts her in a difficult position financially. A widow in Israel was not provided for out of her deceased husband’s estate.” (William Sanger Campbell in *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke, Vol. 1*, 191.)

This widow without a son might be mistreated and exploited. She might have to depend on some sort of public assistance. Her financial situation appears to be tenuous at best.

But, of course, she has lost more than her finances. First, she has lost her husband. And now she has lost her only son.

On June 11, 1983, Eric Wolterstorff, the 25-year-old son of Yale Divinity School Professor Nicholas Wolterstorff, was killed in a mountain climbing accident in Austria. To honor Eric, Wolterstorff wrote an utterly frank and faithful book about his grief entitled, *Lament for a Son*. I commend it to all people who grieve. And for parents who grieve children, I do not know of a greater resource, other than Holy Scripture and prayer. At one point Wolterstorff writes, “He was a gift to us for twenty-five years. When the gift was finally snatched away, I

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realized how great it was. Then I could not tell him. An outpouring of letters arrived, many expressing appreciation for Eric. They all made me weep again: each word of praise a stab of loss.

“How can I be thankful, in his gone-ness, for what he was? I find I am. But the pain of the *no more* outweighs the gratitude of the *once was*. Will it always be so?

“I didn’t know how much I loved him until he was gone.” (Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 13.)

As painful as it is, we expect to bury our parents, don’t we? But there is something utterly unnatural, something so wrong, an agony unparalleled in a parent having to bury a child. “I didn’t know how much I loved him until he was gone.” First her husband, now her son—the widow in the procession at Nain is going to bury her child.

We know nothing about her faith, and she does not ask for help. But Luke says Jesus sees her. He sees her. As someone says, “He meets our needs, even when we are too torn apart to ask for help.” (Gregory Anderson Love in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3*, 118.) Jesus does not look past her, uncomfortable with her grief, ready to hurry on to the next

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appointment on his calendar. No. He *sees* her and he has compassion for her. There is a gut-wrenching movement deep within the being of Jesus, a movement of sympathy in which he receives and integrates her brokenness into his own self.

Then he says to the widow, “Stop crying.”

“Stop crying.” This doesn’t sound compassionate. Jesus would get an F in Pastoral Care 101 for this response. “Stop crying.” How can Jesus say this? He says it because he alone is justified in saying it.

Jesus steps forward and touches the bier (a kind of stretcher that holds the dead man). Touching the bier makes Jesus ritually unclean; he doesn’t care about the comments that will come his way. But the pallbearers stand still. (Who ever grabs the coffin on its way to the cemetery? Who *does* that?) The pallbearers are stopped in their tracks. And then Jesus commands, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” And the man sits up, starts talking, and Jesus gives him to his mother.

The funeral has been interrupted.

Of course we ask, “Why does the miracle come for this widow and her son, but not for my child or the child of someone else I love or the

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child that nobody seems to love? Why?” And the story does not answer that question, does it? It is an awful mystery. In fact, we know that eventually this young man died again and was buried.

What are we to make of this miracle? One way of thinking about this miracle and indeed *all* miracles is to see them not merely as exceptions to the normal rules we imagine govern the universe but as signs of what will be, and what already is. This miracle of unsolicited life from death is a marker that points us to the reality beyond what we now see. And we claim this truth every week. “Thy kingdom come thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

This miracle of life out of death, this interrupted funeral is not just a pleasant story we read about from long ago. It is a marker of what already is happening in the world to come. It is a precursor of eternity. And it is also a sign of what God continues to do in our world in small and great ways every single day.

Several years ago I remember reading about a tiny Presbyterian church in a town in North Carolina (I don't remember where). And this church was dying. There were hardly any young families and children.

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Few people showed up for worship. And the church called a new pastor, a young woman. They could barely afford to pay her. Basically she was to be the chaplain to shepherd the congregation to a good death.

But then something happened. The pastor and leaders got together and talked and prayed. They felt the Spirit moving. And they decided that maybe God wasn't ready for that church to die. So they began working together. And they became better at welcoming new people and better at being faithful Christians themselves. And little by little that tiny church began to thrive and grow. And maybe it's too much to call it a miracle, but it sure felt like one to the people there.

In a church I served in Ohio there were a number of AA groups meeting in the church. One of the groups was for women only. In the group was a woman who was in her early 60s, I guess. I'll call her Susie. She was so sweet. She'd see me and make sure to come over and plant a huge hug on me every time. And I would smell like her perfume the rest of the day. Beth would say, "Saw Susie today, didn't you?"

Suzie was a joy. But many years before that her life was out of control because of her drinking. She was married to a professional

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athlete and one day in a drunken rage she shot him in the stomach. Susie went to prison. She hit bottom. Realized she couldn't make up any more excuses and couldn't save herself. So she began to attend AA meetings. Reached out for help from a "Higher Power." And after her time in prison, she and her husband reconciled. And she became one of the joyful people I know. Maybe it's too much to call it a miracle, but it sure felt like one to her.

Jesus interrupted the funeral. And he continues to interrupt funerals every day. Sometimes he uses us, his church, to interrupt funerals for people in need and in pain like that vulnerable and brokenhearted widow. We respond with "hands on" direct help—writing checks to utilities and landlords and giving food and listening and sitting together at table. One of our members has started a nonprofit called A Simple Gesture to feed the hungry in Greensboro and Guilford County.

www.asimplegesturegso.org We also address the systemic issues that need to change. Two of our members are DC this weekend for the national Bread for the World Conference to address public advocacy for hunger relief at home and abroad. www.bread.org Another of our

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members is working with local companies to help them raise wages without bankrupting the company. We're asking questions. What's keeping people economically vulnerable? What's stopping people from getting out of poverty and getting work and living lives that reach their full potential?

And when people die young, we ask why. What is causing the violence and death for the young people in our country? What can we do? Jesus interrupts the funeral, and sometimes he uses us, his church.

Other times it is our own funeral that needs interrupting. Maybe we are physically dying, and we need an interruption. Maybe we're dying of sadness or anger or worry or aimlessness. Maybe we're dying because of some addiction that has wrapped its hands around our throat and is choking the life out of us. Maybe it is something else.

Jesus specializes in interrupting funerals. So we come and ask for what we need. We ask and keep asking until the word comes, as it came to that young man. "I say to you, rise!" Rise! Amen. ©Jeff Paschal