

3RD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

JUNE 9, 2013

WHEN GOD DID NOT USE SELF CONTROL

Pastor Jim Dunn

Luke 7:11-17

Jesus Raises a Widow's Son

11 Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. **12** As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. **13** And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." **14** Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." **15** And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. **16** Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people!" **17** And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country.

She feels her body shaking from her sobbing. She hears her friends and neighbors around her sobbing loudly. Her mind tells her that burial must happen within one day. It is Jewish law. But she cannot believe her son, her only child, is gone. That right now she must walk out of the city gate to the place where he must be buried. She looks up at the stretcher the men are carrying on their shoulders, her son laying on top, wrapped in linen. His face is ashen. Looking at him, she is trying so hard just to breathe through the sobs, when she is startled by a man who comes right up to her. He is not alone, she sees. There are many others with Him, standing behind Him. They look almost as surprised as she feels. He speaks to her, and she is even more surprised because they are words she does not expect. He does not say, "*Ha-Makom yinakhem okha b'tokh sh'ahr avalei Tzion v'Yerushalayim,*" the traditional words of greeting spoken to the bereaved.

Instead, He says to her, "Stop crying." Only He doesn't say it like a friend who is powerless to do anything and can't bear to see her in such pain. He says it with such compassion in His face, with such tenderness as if He were about to do something about her pain. Indeed, she watches Him go on past her and walk right up to the stretcher in a business-like fashion. And He touches the stretcher on which her dead son is lying.

For you and me as onlookers, as Gentile onlookers, the significance of Jesus touching that stretcher may be lost on us. We don't realize that Jews consider the dead and everything they touch as unclean. What Jesus did was taboo. He made Himself ritually unclean by touching that stretcher. So the word translated here for touch is not the usual word for touch. This is a stronger word. It's meaning is just the opposite of self-control.

In other words, when Jesus saw this woman in such pain, He cast aside all self-control. Not in a sinful way, but in order to do something about her pain. He did not test her first to see if she had faith. He did not wait to see if she would ask for His help, or to see if she even knew who He was. He did not use this situation as a teaching moment. He simply took action. It was one moment when God did not exercise self-control, so that He could reach out His hand to help.

There are people who always exercise self-control when it comes to the pain of others. They have pulled away from the world's pain. They have attempted in every possible way to shield their eyes from the grieving, the suffering, the oppressed, the addicted, the enslaved, and the sick. They have used every conceivable justification for pulling in their nerve-endings and washing their hands of the world's pain and agonizing problems.

I don't believe that describes either you or me. But I know that I am sometimes frightened by what goes on in the world. I think that at times instead of reaching out you and I just throw up our hands in despair, are tempted to give up, are tempted to use the church not as a hospital but as a tornado shelter, as an under stair closet in which to cower and hide from all of the turmoil and change in the world.

“Get up!” Jesus says to us.

“Get up!” the woman heard Him say to her dead son. Jesus was still standing there next to the stretcher, still touching it. He said to her dead son, “Get up!”

Though for a split second it crossed her mind that this man was mental, she saw her son move. She saw her dead son get up. She heard him talking as if he had never stopped, as if he were in mid-thought, as if death had merely interrupted some point he had been trying to make.

“Get up!” says Jesus to we, who are gradually dying under the pressure and pain of trying to be caring Christians to a world of turmoil and change. “Get up!” Jesus says when we are afraid of dying to self and sacrificing self for this uncertain and insecure world. “Get up!” Jesus says to we who are dead in our trespasses and sins of throwing our hands up in despair. “Get up!” He says.

And we do. Each day, through the purifying waters of forgiveness, we are raised to newness of life. By the One who can wash away all that has been wrong today, because nothing, not even the touching of the dead could actually make Jesus unclean. Even on the cross when He became sin for us, He remained the Lamb, the spotless, perfect Lamb of God who takes away the hand-throwing sin of despair. He put off His own grave clothes. From our grave clothes of despair and giving up, He raises you and me.

“Get up!” Jesus says to us, because there are yet others who will receive Jesus' touch through us and will be helped and saved, who will receive our joyful lack of restraint and self-control in reaching out to them with a phone call or an invitation or a card of encouragement. Who will receive our joyful witness: “God has visited His people!” “Get up!” the woman heard Jesus say to her dead son. She herself was raised to new life. At first she was stunned. She couldn't move, such that Jesus had to bring her son over to her. She felt herself shaking again, but this time with excitement and she felt her tears flowing again but this time with overwhelming joy. Joy by which she proclaimed her joyful witness, “God has visited His people!”

AMEN

