Sermon | Proper 5C\*

TEXT: Luke 7:11-17

5 June 2016

*The Procession of Life Meets the Procession of Death*

*In the Name of +Jesus. Amen,*

As [Jesus] 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. And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.” Then he came up and touched the [coffin], and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesusgave him to his mother.

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

Dear saints,

Two crowds, two huge crowds of people, and they’re on the move. Their moving toward one another, about to collide, about to crash into one another there, at the gate, the entryway to the city of Nain. The one crowd is the procession of life. The other is the procession of death. So we have this question: which crowd will step aside and let the other can pass?

The one crowd—the procession of death—is being led by the pallbearers, carrying this young man in his coffin. He’s dead. And his mother is walking alongside. She’s weeping. She’s crying. Luke tells us, she’s got two strikes against her. Number one, she a widow. She’s already lost her husband. And now, she’s carrying her only son to his grave. The funeral has just finished inside the city. And now, the pallbearers are carrying his body outside the city, to the place of burial for the committal. And they come to the gate.

The other crowd—the procession of life—is led by Jesus. Jesus is the life, the way the truth and the life. “I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus says, “whoever believes in me shall live and never die.” Jesus leads the procession of life, with his disciples and a large crowd following. And they too come to the gate.

And so again, two crowds, two processions: the procession of life, and the procession of death. And so again, the question: which crowd will step aside and let the other pass?

As a vicar, and as a pastor, I’ve been involved in a number of funerals. And I have this unique vantage point sitting in the lead car for the procession. And we have this custom in this country that all traffic stops for a funeral. And we know this. If you’re driving, you pull off to one side, turn your lights on. If you’re walking, you might stop, take off your hat, say a prayer for the family. It doesn’t matter. All traffic stops for a funeral. A funeral procession can even go through the red lights. This is our custom.

And I think it’s a good custom to have. I think it’s a custom we have out of respect for the dead. We recognize that we are mortal. That one day, no matter who you are, or what you’ve done, you too will join in this procession of death. It’s a sad thought. But it’s a real thought, and a mature thought, a mark of spiritual maturity—that we recognize our mortality. And as much as we hate the idea, we have no power over death. No matter how hard we try, we cannot give ourselves the gift of immortal life. Now, with the advances of modern medicine, there are things we can do to prolong our lives a little, there are things we can do to make our lives more comfortable while we live. But at the end of the day, the funeral procession goes on. And we cannot stop it. And so we step aside. We let it pass.

So we know what Jesus should do. We know what the polite thing, the respectable thing for Jesus to do would be: that his crowd should give way to the other crowd, that the procession of life should give way to the procession of death. It would be rude to get in the way. And you almost wonder—as the disciples see this procession coming, as they’re seeing the casket being carried by the men, as they’re seeing this weeping, mourning mother, as they’re seeing all the crowds weeping and mourning behind—you almost wonder if the disciples would’ve instinctively stepped aside to let them pass?

But not Jesus. Not today. Jesus stands in the way, in the middle of the road. He doesn’t move. He doesn’t budge. He stands in the middle of the gate, and puts his hand out, and touches the coffin, and the men stand still. He looks at this mother, and his heart is filled with compassion, and he says, “Don’t cry.” And then he says to this man, who’s being carried out in his coffin, “Young man, I say to you arise.”

Never in the history of the world have words like that been spoken. Never in the history of all humanity, has anything like that ever happened before. And this man does it. It’s amazing. He sits up and begins to talk. We were talking at our pastor’s study last Thursday how it would’ve been cool if Luke told us what he said. “What are you all doing here?” “Did I miss the party?” It’s amazing. And Jesus takes this man and gives him to his mother. And all the people—as you would be, and so would I—are amazed and afraid. “This is a great prophet!” They say. “This is God visiting us.” And this is the point: **Jesus stands in the way of death**. He will not step aside. He will not let it pass.

And here, in our Lord’s words and actions in this miracle, this Raising of the Widow’s Son at Nain, we begin to see the reason Jesus has come into this world, what he’s has come to do. You see, Jesus doesn’t talk about death the way the world talks about death. Jesus doesn’t tell you that death is something you just need to accept or come to terms with. He doesn’t tell you that death is normal, natural part of the circle of life, or offer any kind of false comfort like that. When Jesus talks about death, he talks about it as an enemy—it’s an enemy to be defeated. And this is why he has come into the world: to defeat death, to destroy it forever, and give you and me the gift of eternal life.

And when Jesus he goes to the cross, this is where it happens. This is the ultimate battle, the ultimate cage match: life versus death. Jesus, your Jesus, on the one side: the Lord of life. And death on the other. And at first, it seems like death wins the day. After all, he dies, is crucified, died, and was buried for you, with your sin on him. And in fact, all the world’s sin, sickness, weakness, brokenness and death, on him, as the sin-bearer, the Lamb of God. And it kills him. But he is the Lord of life. Death cannot hold him. And so he rises from the dead. His death is the death of death.

And then at Easter, on Easter morning, when we see the stone rolled back, when we hear the angel proclaiming the good news of the Gospel, “He is not here. He is risen,” there at Easter, we get our answer. Which crowd will ultimately step aside, and give way, so that the other can pass? Will the procession of life give way? Or the procession of death? And at Easter, we see it. Death gives way to life. The procession of death ends, and the procession of life begins, at the empty tomb of your Savior.

And you—you, by Holy Baptism, have been joined to him, as an adopted son, daughter of God, and an heir of all the heavenly treasures he won for you on the cross. You, by Holy Baptism, have been joined to that procession of life. And the hope that you have as a Christian, is even though this mortal life shall cease, just like it did for this boy, this widow’s son—your hope as a Christian is that what your Lord has done for him, he will do for you. On the Last Day, he will come to your grave and say, “Arise. Stand up. Come with me, join me, in feast of victory, in the procession of life that will never end.”

This is good news. The best news. And we take it with us wherever we go: to the grave of loved ones, and to our own graves: we are with Jesus in the procession of life that will never end. And even though there will come a time when we die and leave this sinful world behind, death doesn’t have the last word. The last word belongs to the Lord of life. And that word is resurrection.

*In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit*. **Amen**.

\* *This sermon was adapted from a sermon preached by Rev. Bryan Wolfmueller on this same text, preached at his congregation in Aurora, Co. on 10.5.14.*