

Sermon: Pentecost 3

The Rev. Mike Wernick

June 5, 2016

Year C

1 Kings 17:17-24

Psalm 30

Galatians 1:11-24

Luke 7:11-17

Elijah emerges out of the wilderness... somewhat wild himself... in the storytelling of many cultures... the wild man is set over and above culture and its conventions... read about Enkidu [en-key-doo] from the Epic of Gilgamesh... and remember Samson... John the Baptist... and even Tarzan... being a prophet will do that to you... the Word of God will do that to you... and Elijah comes to the gate of Zarephath... and encounters a woman... in the longer version of today's Jewish scripture... you'll remember... that things are not going well for her... she is food insecure... she's gathering wood... getting ready to prepare a meal for her son and herself from what remains in their pantry... their last meal... so they can then die... her vulnerability underscores the risk that the Word of God presents to those who confront it... the wild man wants this food for himself... and on behalf of her and her son... Elijah challenges God to keep the jar of oil and meal full... even as it is used... to keep the Word of God coming... even as it is heard... and God cooperates... and the three of them eat for many days...

But then her son became so ill that he died... and this woman names... as Professor Carolyn Sharp did... the darkest dread that a community can harbor about its prophets... that Elijah's presence has brought God's wrath upon her... she wonders why after having been kind to him... that her only son has died... and again... Elijah challenges God... Professor Sharp wrote: this wrenching loss cannot go unaddressed... not here... not in this fragile community that has been brave enough to host the Divine in its midst... and God listens...

And when her son is revived... when she affirms that Elijah is a man of God... her words echo those of Jethro of Midian who... when God redeemed the Israelites from slavery... said: *Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods...* and what the angel

said when Abraham bound Isaac... *Do not lay your hand on the boy... for now I know that you fear God...*

I don't like the idea of fearing God... not when we have these stories that show God's love and compassion... because in welcoming the prophet we learn that God's power isn't among us for judgment... but for life... but I also think that to fear God is to have compassion... because in an incomprehensibly vast and gorgeous universe... where entire galaxies are crashing into each other... life is also fragile... and compassion is an appropriate response to that fragility...

But one of the lies we tell ourselves... is that we're in control... that life is to be conquered... and when you don't... when you can't... you're weak... this lie creates tension between self-sufficiency and dependence... between having enough... or far too much... and not having enough... of being too vulnerable... of being the working poor... or worse...

[So]... Jesus and the disciples were headed towards Nain... and they encounter another group headed towards a funeral... the widow probably didn't see Jesus... her son had just died... and Jewish custom would dictate that he be buried within twenty-four hours... and in addition to her raw grief... she had to be wondering how she could survive... no husband... now no son... no income... no pension or life insurance policy... and even if she had a daughter... her daughter would have been more burden than help... she couldn't even afford a dowry to marry her off... just another non-income producing mouth to feed... so really... this woman... this widow... was headed not just to her son's funeral... but to her own funeral too...

And Jesus perceives her sorrow... knows her fear... knows how things ought to work... but don't... Jesus feels compassion for her... and so without even being asked... without even touching her son... without lying on top of him three times... heart to heart

and breath to breath... just by touching the funeral bier itself... and speaking the Word... he relinquishes fear and restores life to two people...

I think sometimes we're afraid... that the people in this country are sometimes afraid to allow life's fragility to affect us... afraid to feel compassion so deeply that it gets to us... moves us... breaks us too... we want to believe that everyone else should just pull themselves up by their bootstraps the way we did... on our own... without any help... we're afraid to feel their pain because then there's usually something we need to do in response to that feeling... to give... something... and we're afraid of not having enough too... of there not being enough to go around...

But the truth is... that there's plenty to go around... there's enough for everyone's basic necessities to be met... but we're surrounded by systems which make it easier for a few to hold on to far more than they could ever need... and which make it almost impossible for far too many to get enough to get by... so this story I believe is less about the miracle... and is more about God's compassion for those who suffer as the result of broken social systems... as St. John Chrysostom said: *feeding the hungry is greater work than raising the dead...*

And when we feel inspired to help effect change... change that is hard... and time consuming... it exposes us... opens us up to criticism... when we defend others... when we affirm their inherent worth and dignity as children of God... we ourselves become targets... vulnerable to the taunts of those who wonder why they can't just get a grip... get a life... figure it out... and why we'd even want to associate with them... like Jesus did with the prostitutes and tax collectors... why wasn't Jesus friends with the wealthy and powerful... like we are...

Joel and I just watched the new version of Roots on the History Channel... it was hard to watch... harder than I imagined it might be... cringe-worthy violence was perpetuated against people who were also God's children... and I became aware that the pain of my

own compassion... and the discomfort of my own racism minimized what I saw because it was so horrific... how did they know who did what to whom... I wanted to believe that they were exaggerating the violence solely for dramatic effect... but we know about slavery... slavery made the south richer than any other part of the country... and in some of the southern states' efforts at secession... they flat out said that they were trying to protect their economic stability... their economic way of life... it was all about dehumanizing others to create and protect power and money... so it didn't really matter whether every detail was historically accurate... the truth was still in the story... just as it really doesn't matter whether Jesus raised the widow's dead son... the truth that transcends the story... is that we are called to not only name the systems which promote oppression... and to work against them... but also to act with compassion when we see how they affect... or create... widows of any kind...

So who are the widows of our day... who are the most vulnerable... who are affected the most by laws which make it harder for them to meet their needs... or by laws which allow others to make it harder for them to do so... are undocumented immigrants our widows... those whose families are torn apart... as slave families were torn apart... when they're sent back across the border... in spite of marriage equality... when you can still be fired from your job for who you love... because there are no legal protections... are LGBT people our widows... what about those who can't drink Flint's water and can't move away... what about those affected by human trafficking... by addiction... by poverty... what about the church herself... the list goes on...

The gate in the city of Zarephath is a portal where wilderness meets civilization... the funeral bier is a portal between life and death... and we are the portal between God's compassion... and those in culture who... as John Shea wrote... don't want us to expose the assumptions and social mechanisms that shape deprivation and death... because so much is at stake... just like it was for those who used slaves...

But scripture reminds us... Jesus shows us... that compassion brings new life... so the next time you encounter some kind of injustice... the next time you experience someone disrespecting someone's dignity... when you have an opportunity to vote into effect... a change that protects... remember this passage from the Talmud: *Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work that lies before you... but neither are you free to abandon it...*

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