

Are You the One? Pt. 2
Interrupting the Dead
Luke 7: 11-17

**First Presbyterian Church
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Do traffic snarls bring out compassion in you? For me, it's only when I see a traffic stall going in the opposite direction. "Awww, look at those poor people Rhonda! Their interstate lane is at a dead stop." My compassion, of course is always laced with a bit of triumph that I'm going the opposite way. If, however, it is my lane that is blocked, concern for what other people are experiencing flees away. Last week I left late, as usual, for our elders' Bible study. I turned onto the "on" ramp for I-10 at Acadian. As I climbed the ramp, I noticed a school bus stopped ahead of me. The interstate was moving but the bus was stalled. Could I get around it? No, the Stop Sign Arm was out. Oh no, I'm going to be stuck for an hour. Was I for one second concerned for the little kids that might be on the bus? For the driver? Naw. I turned on my flashers and backed down the ramp praying I wouldn't get plowed into. Once I was flowing on surface streets, I thought about the people stuck there. With more relief for myself than compassion for them. In my fast-paced, very important, always hurried life I don't do obstacles very well.

In today's story, Jesus journeyed some 32 miles south from the small town of Capernaum to the even smaller village of Nain. After his miracle of healing the centurion's servant, a large crowd was following Jesus. The Lord and his disciples were a veritable parade as they jammed the narrow roads into the town. For Jesus, everything was rolling. He was preaching and people were responding. He was healing and people were believing. Expectation and excitement followed wherever he went. He was the "It" guy, the man of the moment. Many people wondered, "Are you the one? The savior we've been waiting for?"

Suddenly Jesus encountered a clash of parades. As his crowd approached the town gate of Nain, another large crowd was coming out of town. It was a funeral procession. They were carrying the body of a young man to be buried in a cemetery outside the gates. In those days, the body, wrapped in burial clothes, would be carried out on a bier, a kind of stretcher with poles. The joyful multitude of Jesus' followers hit the obstacle of a funeral parade attended by nearly the whole town of Nain. What was Jesus to do? This traffic confrontation presented Jesus with choices that would, as usual, define the kind of ministry he was to have among us. He could do what we would expect was the polite thing: to stand aside.

To give way. Honor the dead. Respect the grieving. Move your people off the road and let them pass. Or he could do the kingly thing and expect the mourners to give way to his royal procession. Fulfill some prophecies. Have a disciple shout, “Prepare the way of the Lord! Make way for the king!” Or he could have an encounter that could transform both competing parades into one new community.

Before we look at how Jesus chose that third way, let’s connect to the situation. When you are a child, you are always following along in the wake of other people’s parades. Your parents put you in the car and take you to school. The teachers control what you do and what you learn. All of life is that way. When you grow up and leave home, choices open up for you. Go to class or skip. Become a banker or a doctor or just go travelling for a few years. Your life is fluid and open. What you decide to do for a few months affects very few people and there seems always time to reroute: change your major; move to a different city; try a different career. But once some powerful choices are made and you hit the stride of adult life, it’s not quite as easy to make changes. Because you discover that there is a parade of people behind you. What you do affects many. Spouse. Children. Coworkers. Employees. Friends. Ministries. You are travelling with a head of steam that is responsibility. Around you are the people travelling in your wake—your choices affect them.

So maybe you are moving along in a fast lane. Your practice is growing. Your business flourishes. You’ve got the mortgage, the car, the school tuitions, the club fees, the entertainment expectations all flowing from the wake of your effort, your skill and your success and your collaboration with your spouse. This train is rolling. And then suddenly there is oncoming traffic in your lane. The bright light of a freight train that won’t stop shines in your eyes. It slams into you with words like: A child develops special needs. Special and expensive needs. Recession. Bad numbers. Layoff. Lawsuit. Malpractice. Accident. Concussion. Knee blow out. Chronic fatigue. The barely whispered words, “I don’t think I love you anymore.” Or the stark, “You’re just not a fit here.” We get stonewalled and stymied. There is a clash of parades. The life you were leading runs into life’s obstacles. Our happy progress becomes a funeral procession. Do you pull over and just quit? Do you plow ahead anyway straight into the wreckage? Or is there a way for the encounter to transform everything?

Jesus did not rush his decision. He looked. He listened. He ascertained what was going on. This funeral was for a young man. The young man happened to be the only son of a woman. The woman happened to be a widow. She was now alone. The flashbacks of a life appeared in his imagination. A husband, wife and

boy sitting around a table after a hard day's work. Laughing and loving together. A husband in the field clutching his heart as he fell to the ground. The mother and growing son around that table, no longer laughing, but speaking kindly to each other. Then the mother by candlelight by herself at the table, counting the few coins from her bag. Alone. Poor. No immediate means of support.

Luke tells us that when Jesus saw her, his heart overflowed toward her. The English word compassion here is too nice for the gutsy word that Luke has chosen. Literally, Jesus was moved in his guts. His innards roiled. He was viscerally disturbed. Truly seeing this situation, Jesus let himself be more disturbed by the widow's plight than by the interruption in his journey. He looked until he felt for her. And then he had to act. He needed to engage the power of death itself.

In story structure, what happens next is the point of no return for the hero. It's the commitment to change that cannot be taken back. He will either triumph or crash based on what he does here. And this next thing will reveal to us the truth of who this hero really is. For Jesus, this reveal happened in two parts.

First he spoke. "Don't cry," he said. This, of course, was outrageous. The purpose of the funeral rites was to provide a place for weeping. At this time, one could acceptably bewail a loss, letting it all out in the company of a supportive community. This was part of grieving well. Moreover, telling someone not to cry implies that you have a reason for them not to cry. You have a comfort that overrides the source of mourning. And there is only thing that can properly comfort a widow who has lost her only son: giving that boy back to her. Promises of heaven amidst the sharpness of loss are often more infuriating than they are comforting. "Don't cry, he's in a better place" is a true statement. But I'd strongly advise you not to say that unless asked. Jesus spoke these words because he intended to back them up.

Second, he touched the bier. He placed his hand on the stretcher that held the corpse. Can you imagine if we were carrying a casket out of our sanctuary and a guy came up, stopped the pall bearers and put his hands on the casket? It would be shocking. Jesus interrupted a funeral. And then he interrupted death. He called a halt to grief. He called a full stop to the man's demise.

"Young man, I say to you, arise." That word arise can mean to wake up from sleep. Or to get up from sitting or lying down. It's the same word used of Jesus when he came back from the dead. He arose from death. He woke up and he got up. This was a preview of Easter. The dead man sat up at Jesus' command. He

began to speak. And Jesus gave him to his mother. He didn't tell the man to come follow him. He gave him back to his mother. He restored their life together. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. In his ministry among us, God's only Son so loved the widow that he gave her only begotten son back to her.

Then the two crowds became one. The crowd of Jesus's followers and the crowd of the only son's mourners had the same reaction. First, fear seized them. A dead man sitting up shivered their insides. Then fear turned to worship. They glorified God! They praised the Lord who had visited his people. They believed Jesus was the one. The long awaited Messiah who like Elijah the prophet could raise the dead. The long awaited Christ who like Moses could speak God's truth. Worship united them.

We know we face ongoing traffic as we press ahead in our lives. The crowd that flows in our wake can turn quickly from a rejoicing, expectant group to a procession of mourners. This will happen. And opportunity for transformation awaits us on two fronts.

One, when our parade is interrupted, Jesus will be there. He will see how it is with us. He will receive the shock, the sorrow, the worry of our situation deeply into his soul. And he will be filled with love for us. His heart goes out to us constantly. It is often precisely in the interruption of the flow of our lives that we become aware of the Savior who has been there all along. He sees us. He cares.

And he still speaks, "Don't cry." These are empty words if Christ can't do anything about it. But Jesus is the one who interrupted death. And still does. First he interrupts death as he turns the sorrows and the struggles, the losses and the setbacks into *life* we never expected to know. Through the opening of our wounds, he pours his love. And we are changed. And that very heart change assures us that our future hope is not a dream but real. More life is coming. Resurrection reunions are coming. Death will be not only interrupted but eliminated. The British author Francis Spufford imagines the words of Jesus this way, "Don't be afraid...Far more can be mended than you know." Or, as one woman struggling with depression heard Jesus say, "I understand. My hope runs deeper than your sadness." He can speak such things because he has passed through betrayal and sorrow, through death and loneliness, through rejection and hell. Jesus knows what is on the other side and he will take us to himself. "Don't cry." He doesn't mean there will be no cause for tears. But he promises that this present sorrow is not all there is, and it will not remain this way forever. Christ's future pours into our

present lives with hope as we see the mending Jesus undertakes in each life that trusts him.

And what does Jesus do with these wounded hearts which he mends so carefully? He does not remove us right away from this broken world. Rather he sends us to it. He shapes us so that we can respond with compassion to those whose lives have been interrupted by loss. He sends us to look upon the little ones and the lost ones until the very guts of our souls are also moved. And we have to do something about it. He sends us to touch and to love. He sends us to join him in the work of giving sons back to mothers. He puts before us people who ache for restoration.

I listened this week to the story of how a counselor helped a mother and a son speak to each other. All the lad really wanted was for his mother to keep tucking him in at night. And this slight shift in her attention dramatically improved his behavior at school. I watched a college student mentoring a child. His eyes locked on the face of the child with full attention. He beamed at him. His attention never wavered, and the child lit up with joy. I noticed how adding one more sentence in a conversation could open the sharing of a heartfelt need. Just ask a question that gives someone room to speak what's in their soul, and they will open into restoration.

Jesus went to where people really live, grieve, work, dance, strive and hope. He encountered the parades of sorrow in every life. Jesus did not just pull of the road, letting people pass by alone in their struggles. Nor did Jesus just keep plowing through with his own agenda, overrunning people so he could be the star. He stopped and looked until he understood the situation. He looked until he felt compassion arise. Then he spoke and acted in love. He did what he could to give people back to one another.

That's our work, dear ones. We come together to be mended as we glorify our Lord together. Then we go out with ears open and eyes peeled for the people whom God will place in our path to love. We stretch out a hand to them. We speak words of hope. For the Jesus who gave the only son back to the widow still does it.