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Lessons in Luke: New Life Luke 7:11-17

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The global pandemic of 2020 will be remembered in so many ways. But I think that more than any other way, it will be remembered as a year of loss. So much loss, a profound loss of life, a loss of a sense of safety, loss of social connections and personal freedoms, loss of jobs and financial security, and for our young people – the loss of in-person education, arts, music, sports, and just good old hanging out with friends. And the list goes on and on.

One of the losses that I felt most acutely – and still feel – is the loss of rituals, traditions, ways of marking important moments in life: births, baptisms, confirmations, weddings, public, in-person worship, and of course funerals, memorial services, and the ability to grieve together in person.

If you were to look at the Prince of Peace calendar for this past year, you'd see the names of a number of families who lost loved ones. And while small gatherings of under ten people have been taking place here and there, dealing with the loss of loved ones in that way that we've become accustomed to has been a big challenge.

Death is a difficult issue to deal with, let alone understand. Death connects us with thoughts, emotions, and feelings that we usually don't spend much time processing until we're forced to deal with them. And when that happens, we're usually so emotionally depleted, that we don't have the capacity to understand that death actually has a lot to teach us – if we're willing to learn. While many people approach the idea that after life comes death, Jesus, in a remarkable story from Luke's gospel, turns that whole way of thinking completely upside down. Moved with compassion by the pain of loss in a small community, Jesus powerfully demonstrated that after death, comes new life. This is a story that once written into the pages of scripture, is still speaking into the lives of people today, which leads to this week's One Big Question: How do we show the compassion of Jesus to others?

That's what the people in the ancient town of Nain were wondering, after this whole episode was over.

Nain, which literally means “beautiful, pleasant” was the name of a town about 25 miles southwest of Galilee, which sounds a lot like something out of a Dr. Suess book. But it was anything but that when Jesus met a funeral procession on the way to the cemetery. Jesus, who seemed to have a degree in perfect timing, was coming from Capernaum where he had just raised a Roman soldier's son from the dead. Pastor Jason led us through that story last week. People are now following Jesus, there's a gigantic crowd around him. It's almost like they want more of this rabbi, this man who works miracles and breathes so much life back into the lives of people who are grieving. They will not be disappointed. [Read Luke 7:11-17]

¹¹ Soon [after leaving Capernaum, Jesus] went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. ¹² As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. ¹³ When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, “Do not weep.” ¹⁴ Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” ¹⁵ The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. ¹⁶ Fear [Awe] seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has risen among us!” and “God has looked favorably on his people!” ¹⁷ This word about Jesus spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

This is the word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God.

This is a story filled with intention and purpose. The Gospel writer, Luke, has an agenda. His purpose is to create a tension between life and death; or, more to the point, between death and life. We're supposed to feel the pain of this moment, the depth of this loss. Understanding the sheer ache of the grief and loss in this story is important because the deeper the sense of loss, the greater the sense of new life—resurrection that comes from it. Let me show you what I mean. Luke tells us that the young man who died was “...his mother's only son.” Think about that: he was her “only” son – not another one like him at home, as if that would have somehow softened the blow. So she's on the way to the cemetery to bury her flesh and blood, her only son. And just as that part of the story is beginning to sink in, Luke adds this little detail: “...and she was a widow.” Wait, what? She's lost her husband. And now she's lost her “only begotten son.” In the first century, that would

have been a death sentence for her. With her husband gone, her life is in jeopardy. Who will care for her with her husband gone? Well her son, of course. That's the way it worked. But now her son is gone and with him, her support was gone as well. She's all alone. She's done, she's completely done, or so she believes.

But friends, this is where the kingdom of God breaks into the reality of death and grief and loss with the message of New Life. Jesus wanted this mother to know that even in the midst of the grief of loss and death that she was experiencing, she was not alone. She was not done. The people of Nain, this beautiful community of new life, surrounded her and embraced her as they lived with one big question: How do we show the compassion of Jesus to others?

The grieving mother is certainly a central figure in this story, but when we understand what Jesus intended to have happen in the hearts and lives of the people surrounding this grieving mother – for them to awaken a deeper sense of compassion for people around them – we understand the purpose of this story for us today: to stir up compassion in us for those who are living with grief and loss. This, then, is NOT a story about death. This is a story about life – lives filled with compassion, which leads to action.

Now, I want to acknowledge one really important thing. And that is that most of us – within hearing distance of my voice today – feel some level of discomfort when it comes to helping people who are experiencing grief, loss, and death. That's normal. In fact, when faced with the idea of being with someone else who is hurting, many people would say, "I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do." I get it. Wading into grief and loss is difficult for everyone. But I'm here right now to tell you this one thing that's going to change your life forever: You don't have to say anything. You don't have to say a word. Just be there. Just show up and be present. So much love and so much healing gets done without ever saying a word.

Now, if you simply feel like you just have to say something, then just simply say: "I'm sorry." But being present, being available, being compassionate is what we're called to do. Think back to the story of the woman in Nain. No one is telling her that her son and her husband are in a better place. No one is telling her that God needed another fisherman, or needed another carpenter. No one is telling her that it'll be okay; to just give it some time. No one is saying one thing to her. They're all simply walking with her, sitting with her, being with her in her grief. They are practicing compassion.

What does this ancient story look like in real time in our real lives today? How does the experience with Jesus in

this ancient community, with this woman, and her once-dead-but-now-living son, breathe life back into us? How does this ancient story resurrect us, bring us back to life?

I want you to hear from three people today, each of whom has experienced a significant amount of loss in this last year. These people will lead us into death, through grief, and back into resurrection. And through their experiences you'll rediscover the compassion of Jesus that touched their lives through a compassionate community.

(Video)

[Questions for those who were Interviewed: Tell me about your loss. What/who did you lose, and how did it happen? What was the impact of that loss? What did that mean for you? What "did it do" to you? Disappointed? Angry? Did it throw you for a loop? At what point did you feel "done," like your life was somehow over (like the widow in the story)? Who walked alongside of you? How did the "faith community" show up for you? How did your family and friends, your church—how did the Spirit arrive for you in that? How did God help you? How did Jesus "bring you back to life"?]

I'm so grateful for their stories and how they can touch our lives. These are important questions that our sisters and brothers are dealing with. I want to both challenge and encourage you to spend some time this week working through these same questions. I've created the 5-Day Devotional (popmn.org/downloads) for you to help you navigate through these questions. For each of the daily readings and devotions, I'm going to challenge you to read the passage from Luke 7:11-17 each day. Each day read it slowly and carefully, allowing the words to settle into you. These are important questions. I want to encourage you to dig deep into these questions to find where they settle with you.