

Who's in Charge?

Before anything today, I want to recognize and thank those of you who have been long-time, committed members of this church. You are and have been the spine of this community, through its tough days, its glory days, and its days, like now, of lots of change, lots of new faces, lots of activity. Please know that I remember you with gratitude in my prayers every day.

You who have been here a long time know well that with Jesus, you never know what's coming next. And while there are many times that we reflect on the Jesus who comes to us in our suffering; today is a day to reflect on the Jesus who turns suffering into joy.

Out of the town of Nain comes the funeral. Out of the town of Nain, a community copes with death; a woman who had already lost her husband has now lost her only son. Coming out of the town of Nain.

But coming into the town of Nain is someone who is stronger than death. Someone with a smile on his face. Someone whose heart melts at the sight of the grieving mother. And with a kind touch, a gentle smile, the Lord of life touches the bier and says: "Young man, I say to you, rise!"

Only a touch.

Only a word.

And death is transformed into life.

Heartbreak into joy.

Hopelessness into wonder.

Only a touch.

Only a word.

Did you notice the response of the crowd? It was so different from the crowd who came to see what Jesus did with the man possessed by demons at Geresene. Remember he sent those demons into the pigs and the pigs into the sea? That crowd had one thing to say, and one thing only: "Please leave us alone!"

But not the crowd today. They were amazed. They marveled. Being open to God's graciousness has so much to do with a simplicity of heart. A sense of trust, a sense of confidence that God indeed wants what is best for each and every one of us. But how

that “best” gets lived out really does require a sense of simplicity, a sense of letting go, a sense of real trust.

There is a story not found in the Bible, called an apocryphal story; meaning, while it’s not in the Bible, it sure sounds like something Jesus would say and do. Here it is:

“One day, Jesus said to his disciples, ‘I’d like you to carry a stone for me.’ He didn’t give any explanation. So each disciple looked around for a stone, and Peter, being the practical one, sought out the smallest stone he could possibly find. After all, Jesus didn’t give any regulations on size or weight! So, he put it in his pocket. Jesus then said: ‘Follow me.’

He led them on a journey. About noontime, Jesus had everyone sit down. He waved his hands, and all the stones turned to bread. He said: ‘Now it’s time for lunch.’ Peter’s lunch was over very soon.

When lunch was done, Jesus told them to stand up. He said again: ‘I’d like you to carry a stone for me.’ This time,

Peter said, ‘Aha! I get it!’ So he looked around for the biggest rock he could find. He hoisted it on his back. It was painful. He staggered. But he said: ‘I can’t wait for supper!’ Jesus then said: ‘Follow me.’

He led them on a journey, with Peter barely able to keep up. Around suppertime, Jesus led them to the side of a river. He said: ‘Now, everyone throw your stones into the water!’

They did. Then he said: ‘Follow me.’

Peter and the others looked at him dumbfounded. Jesus sighed and said: ‘Don’t you remember what I asked you to do? Who were you carrying the stones for?’

We can take from our gospel lesson today a sense that if we are good and follow the rules, then God will do good things for us. Or, we can take from the gospel lesson the sense that God’s grace blows like the wind, touches who it wishes to touch, and does so for free.

Did you notice that Jesus knew nothing of the widow or her son? She might have been a real witch. She might have been a model citizen. The son might have been a scoundrel. Or, he might have been the neighborhood troop leader. We don’t know. Jesus didn’t know. He simply responded with compassion to the moment that unfolded before him.

We old timers in the faith, our risk is not so much doing the really bad stuff, as we

tend to define “really bad stuff”. No, our risk is creating a relationship with God that puts us in control of God. Being good and doing good, not for goodness sake, but to put God in our debt. So that God owes us. So that on the last day, if not out loud, then in our heart of hearts, I might say: “Let me in God, I’ve done everything I’m supposed to.”

In her novel, *Wise Blood*, Flannery O’Connor says of her character Hazel Motes that “there was a deep, black, wordless conviction in her that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin.” [Keller, *The Prodigal God*].

In other words, if I see faith as a bargain between me and God: “I’ll be good, you reward me”, then I don’t need a Savior. I’m my own savior.

This is why Christianity is not a religion. It’s why Christianity is not a system of ethics or a code of conduct. Christianity is our recognition that God has done for you, for me, for the whole world, what we cannot do for ourselves.

G.K. Chesterton was a famous Roman Catholic writer. A newspaper asked this question: “What’s wrong with the world?” Chesterton replied to the paper:

“Dear Sirs, I am. Sincerely yours, G.K. Chesterton.”

[Keller]

God extends his hand to us and asks not so much for our good behavior but for our trust; not so much for our discipline, but for a simplicity of heart.

Leaving the village of Nain was a parade defeated by death. Coming into that same village was the Lord of Life, who loves us all, who wants us all; for free, having paid the price for us himself.

As we leave this holy place today, raise your arms and lift up whatever may be dead in you: a grudge, a fear, a laziness, a need to control, to be secure, to be in charge; lift it up, whatever it may be, and as we leave this holy place; pray that the one who makes it holy will come into our gates, and touch our dead, and transform it all into life, into trust, into love.

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