

# SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Year A

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June 25, 2017

Text: Luke 7:11-17

Title: "The Outsiders: The Lonely"

Working on the sermon this week I came across some quips by comedian Steven Wright:

"Right now I'm having amnesia and déjà vu at the same time. I think I've forgotten this before."

"What happens if you're scared half-to-death twice?"

"I intend to live forever -- so far, so good."

Of course, we don't live forever at least not in these bodies. We age and begin to feel our age. Bob Hope once said, "I don't feel old. I don't feel anything until noon. Then it's time for my nap." And the great Phyllis Diller said this about aging: "Maybe it's true that life begins at 50... but everything else starts to wear out, fall out or spread out." "I don't mind dying. I just don't want to be there when it happens," said Woody Allen.

As children and youth we don't think much about aging and dying. At least I didn't, but things change as we get older. Begin to realize more acutely that this physical life will one day come to an end. Live long enough--and depending on your health--and you may even pray that it does.

Friday night, Lynn and I went to Snow Funeral Home in Saginaw. My first cousin's husband died of brain cancer after spending a year battling it. He was 60 years old. The last time I saw Bill was at another family funeral last May. It was his nephew that time and he was only 23. Tyler was the fourth young nephew in this family who died, and so they have had more than their fair share of grief.

As a pastor I've lost track of the number of times I've had the privilege of being with people when the last breath has been exhausted. Each time I've found it to be a sacred moment, a holy moment. To be there when someone moves from this life to the next—depending on the circumstances—can be a beautiful gift.

I was sitting in the study one day when I received a phone call to go to a parishioner's

home. Don lived with his son-in-law and daughter in an apartment they built for him over their garage. He was one of those faithful church goers. Every Sunday morning--or nearly so--I'd see his truck parked in the lot waiting for the doors to be unlocked. In his early 80's, Don was always there.

When I arrived at Don's home, I made my way up the stairs to his apartment and there he was lying in bed where he had died peacefully, reading a book. I gathered the family around and we had prayer with him there. Then the funeral director arrived and we put Don on a stretcher and because they didn't have enough people to carry Don, I had the privilege of helping to carry him down the stairs and to the hearse. It was a privileged, sacred, holy moment.

When death is expected, the grief is different than when death comes unexpectedly and to someone too young. When a person has lived a full life it seems the natural course of things. But that is not the kind of death experience described in the Gospel According to Luke.

11 Soon afterwards he [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 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 him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

So there is this life-train of Jesus and his crowd coming into town and the death-train of the woman and her crowd making their way out of town to bury her son. The two crowds meet.

She's already lost her husband, this woman. Now it's her son with whom she has to part. Those of you who've experienced it know that losing a child is one of those unexpected, heart-wrenching reversals that knock parents to their knees.

Ben Collon called one morning. Ben was the local funeral home director. He said, "Duane, I have a 4 year old boy who died of Leukemia. The family doesn't have a church. Will you do the funeral?"

"Sure," I said.

That evening I made my way to the funeral home, found the mother and sat down to begin to learn about little Nicholas, what kind of child he was, what their journey had been like, and so on. The father was nowhere to be seen. She didn't know if he would come, she said. "It's been so hard."

We were talking, the two of us, for 20 minutes or so when I noticed a man walk in the room. He began to pace rapidly back and forth, back and forth, on the other side of the room. His wife got up to talk with him, trying to get him to come sit down and talk with me about their son, about the service, when all of a sudden he launched in a loud, angry voice:

**"WHAT THE HELL CAN HE SAY THAT'LL MEAN ANYTHING? HE DIDN'T EVEN KNOW NICHOLAS!"**

I was a young, green, pastor who trusted in the grace of God to heal all wounds, even deep ones like this, but I confess I was at a loss for words to offer them. My first funeral for a child, and for a family not of the church. Parents in agonizing pain.

The next day I paid a visit to the county medical care facility. There was a woman there I'd befriended. A Baptist lady. Very faithful. Focused on her relationship with God. I went into her room, chatted for a bit and listened to what was happening in her life. Then she asked about me and what was happening in my life. I told her about the child and confessed I wasn't clear yet what to say to them at the funeral. She thought for a few moments and offered me a story. It was a story about an angel of God that cared for a child who had died. "There," she said, "maybe that will help."

This aged woman confined to her room gave me the words of compassion and grace for two parents who were in agonizing pain over the death of their little boy.

It's the same kind of pain the woman Jesus meets experiences as she seeks to bury her son. Not only was she left with the gut-wrenching, life reversal of losing her child, but she has lost her only means of support. She lives in a time and place in which there was no Social Security, no safety net for her. The old Levirate law placed the responsibility for a widow's care at the feet of the deceased's brother, but when there was no brother it fell to the son when no other males were available to provide what a woman needed to survive. This son was her sole means of support and she faced the real possibility of being destitute. She was utterly alone.

When Jesus met the death-train, he heard agony in her cries. The harsh social system would leave her destitute. Out of compassion for her he stopped the procession. The Greek word used for "compassion"—"splanchnizesthai"-- here is the same word used in the Good Samaritan story when the stranger saw the man in the ditch and stopped out of compassion for him. It's the same word used in the Prodigal Son story when the father sees the son returning home from a distance, he has compassion on him. It's a word that describes the character of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel expresses compassion for those who hurt: the victims of violence, those who use poor judgement and make poor choices that lead them to fall to the bottom, and here: a woman who has lost a child. Jesus feels for this woman so locked in the loneliness of her grief. Jesus asked for no faith requirement whatsoever. And notice she didn't ask him for anything. There are no caveats or contingencies here. Jesus is the initiator. He stops the procession of people, touches the stretcher, and returns life to her son just with a word from his mouth. Jesus has the power of God over death. Gives him to her, and in so doing he returns not only her child but also her security, her hope, her means of support. So Jesus saves not only his life but hers too.

What is it that you've lost in your life and what was the cost? What has driven you to the kind of deep grief and loneliness that you can't even find it in you to ask for help? Did you find compassion in others? From others? Was someone or were there many who hurt for you, with you, stood by you? Then maybe you know what this woman experienced when Jesus demonstrated that he is a life saver. He did not take life. Only gave it and gives it.

It was years later that Lynn and I sat in the gym in the bleachers of Garber High School.

Our son was on the basketball team and it was game night. I noticed a couple that sat two or three rows down in front of us. I knew I'd seen them before but I just couldn't come up with a name, and it troubled me for some time as the game was played. At some point I looked at the roster of the visiting team, noticing that the couple was rooting for them. There it was. I recognized a last name. It was the last name of that 4 year old boy I'd buried so many years before.

I did some quick math and determined that in the next year or so after this couple lost their little Nicholas they had another child, a boy. That boy was on the court playing against our son's team.

I watched these two as they cheered their son on the court. They looked happy, settled and satisfied.

Jesus is a lifesaver through the gift of compassion. Therefore, be open to receiving Christ's compassion when you're in pain, when you are lonely and feeling isolated. BE Christ's compassion when you're not and someone else needs you. Because whether you and I are the receiver or the giver, when the compassion of Christ is expressed, healing does take place. Lives are saved in Christ's name.