

Denice K. Leslie
June 10, 2007
Luke 7: 11 – 17
I Kings 17:8-24

“Hope of the Hopeless”

Do you recall a time in your life when you felt completely hopeless? When you thought to yourself, “What can one person, alone, do?” When you felt completely at a loss—without resource—without recourse?

As Jesus is entering the town of Nain, the body of a widow woman’s only son is being carried out. This is a picture of complete hopelessness. Utter despair. This is a picture of death.¹

This woman’s future will be buried with her son. There are no options open for her. No way to make a living—no life unless she is connected to some man: a husband, a son, her husband’s brother—and the brother-in-law is an option only if she is childless at the time of her husband’s death.

But this widow woman of the town of Nain is not so fortunate. Today she wails in grief—not only for her son but for herself. This is a picture of helplessness,

1. ¹ I am indebted to the Girardian commentary on this passage and specifically informed by a sermon on this scripture by Christopher G. Milarch, published in Augsburg Sermons 3: Gospels, Series C [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1994], pages 142-146.

powerlessness, injustice. And death is the greatest injustice of them all.

This funeral is gathering steam as it moves through the city. When someone died, they were buried the same day. Carrying the body through the street is the way every one in the town is alerted to the death. People seeing the body and hearing the grieving wail join in, creating a large crowd by the time the procession reaches the city gate.

The city gate. This is where citizens of a town gather to repel invaders. This is the place to do battle to protect their families—to protect life and limb. To fight for the future. This is the place where, today, death meets life.

Where Jesus comes to do battle. He sees the woman and immediately he has compassion for her. His heart goes out to her. He speaks to her, saying, “Do not weep” And then, defying the conventions of his society about what is clean and what is unclean, he touches the bier and speaks to the dead man. Jesus says, “Young man, I say to you rise!” The man sits up and begins to speak. And Jesus gives him to his mother!

Jesus gives him to his mother! What a wonderful picture that is! This is life overcoming death. When Jesus gives this woman her son he also gives this mother her own life.

We as the body of Christ are called to be bearers of life to the hopeless. Those without voice, those without power. Those who have lost their way. We do this when

we have compassion on others and turn that compassion into action just as Jesus did.

A few years ago, a six-year-old boy from Oregon suffered burns over 85% of his body. His condition was so severe that several doctors gave up and one hospital would not admit him because they thought he would die anyway.

His life was saved, however, by eight courageous and committed people his parents, three nurses and three doctors.

The nurses emerged as the true heroines in this real-life drama. After other nurses had quit, these women took eight-hour shifts with the boy, seeing him through skin grafts, operations, crucial periods in which death almost gained victory, and dull, dragging days of rehabilitation.

The boy grew to dislike them, as he innocently thought they caused his intense pain.

His room was like a dungeon. It measured 12 feet by 12 feet. The door was tightly shut, shades were drawn, heat blazed from a gooseneck lamp shining as a substitute for blankets.

The humidity was so high the walls dripped with moisture, and dank air smelled of burned flesh and chlorine-soaked dressings.

The nurses stayed with him, dressed in caps, gowns, masks and gloves as if they were assisting an operation. Within an hour they would be soaked with

perspiration. For 14 desperately long months these dedicated three gave their all to the ailing boy.

Then, one day, he finally climbed from his bed and walked. It was a great day! The nurses were rewarded for their tireless effort.

The lives of all three were so deepened and their sense of satisfaction so great after fighting off the temptation to quit for 14 months, that each said they'd put forth the effort again.

What caused them to feel so satisfied with their work? One might say it was because they found a way to truly serve someone in need. And in so doing, they accomplished something significant. Like American educator Booker T. Washington said, "Those who are happiest are those who do the most for others."²

These nurses understood something that Jesus is teaching us here in our gospel story today:

"We must live with hope, yet we cannot live by hope. It is fine to hope for the best. That, however, is not enough. We cannot merely hope; we must take action.

It's sad how many things are tolerated in the hope that they will improve. Hoping for the best won't do anything. Working and taking action, with hope in your heart, will bring about results. That's a powerful

² Steve Goodlier.

combination. Hope works in our favor only as long as it is accompanied by action and commitment.”³

Jesus had compassion. He turned it into action and gave the woman her life back. He embodied hope. Jesus calls us to be the hope of the world. We are the hope of the hopeless when we dare to do more than wishful thinking. When we dare to take action—to reach across barriers of culture, of class, of race, of bias, of social convention—when we not only have compassion but act on it.

Last night we held a community prayer service here at Memorial for the Hmong community following the shock of having a revered community leader arrested for plotting to overthrow the government of Laos—with who the United States is now at peace.

These arrests of General Vang Pao and nine other Hmong leaders has been very demoralizing, confusing and frightening, especially to the aging members of the Hmong community for whom life in America has always been more about exile than immigration.

General Vang Pao is their Moses. Their promised land was a hoped for return to Laos. But the young—the 1.5 generation born in the camps and raised here understand the promise land to be here in these United

States. Nevertheless, the man whom many credit with making a way for the Hmong to come here has been taken away. And there is fear and confusion in the Hmong community.

The media were out in full force and Pastor Kham Dy and I were interviewed by three different local TV stations. Over and over again, we were asked, “Why is it important to have a prayer service? What is its purpose?”

I realized much later as I watched the newscasts—the purpose is to give the Hmong community hope—to give them new life out of the death of a dream. Because that is what Christians do. We overcome hopelessness. We bring new life out of death dealing blows.

We know what the world doesn’t know: that when we are at the end of our resources and there are no options left—there is! Because there is God—the giver of life, the overcomer of death.

A Christian writer shares this experience, “On a recent trip to Chicago, I had an opportunity to visit the city's Museum of Contemporary Art. There amidst sculptures made of bubble gum and old doors, I came across a piece of art titled "America's Joyous Future" that haunts me.

As contemporary artists often do, Erika Rothenberg took a piece of everyday life, in this case a small church bulletin board, and turned it into a provocative work of art. In a manner familiar to clergy across the land, she spelled out life at one local

³ -Ralph Marston, The Daily Motivator, January 4, 1997.

congregation in simple white letters against a stark black background.

EVENINGS AT 7 IN THE PARISH HALL

Mon. Alcoholics Anonymous

Tues. Abused Spouses

Wed. Eating Disorders

Thur. Say No To Drugs

Fri. Teen Suicide Watch

Sat. Soup Kitchen

Sunday Sermon 9 a.m.

"America's Joyous Future"

As I left the museum I wondered what all its visitors thought as they considered Rothenberg's work of art. Did they see "America's Joyous Future" as an indictment of churches and synagogues that preach pie in the sky in their worship services while remaining oblivious to the real hurts and needs of people?

Or did they see it as a sign that our congregations are deeply immersed in human suffering, that their doors are wide open to the pathologies of the times? Instead of pie in the sky, [are] the thousands of local congregations in our land lifting brave hope out of the ashes of human suffering?

Where in the world, then, does one look for hope? Not for optimism, mind you, but for hope. On the basis of the biblical witness, one looks first to the places of

suffering and of stress."⁴ Because it is here that God is at work. As St. Augustine makes clear:

Hope is the best of the three virtues.

Faith only tells us that God is,

Love only tells us that God is good.

But hope tells us that God will work God's will," ---through us. Let the followers of Jesus say, Amen.

⁴ -Peter Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible With Mind and Heart* (New York: Avon Books, 1996), 229-230.