

June 5, 2016

Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church

Luke 7:11-17

### **Have You Seen the Crowd? Been the Crowd? Can You Be the Crowd?**

A couple years ago, in the days between Christmas and New Year's my family and I went on a road trip to Tennessee. We'd never been to that state and we wanted to go on a little winter vacation at a place with milder weather at a drivable distance. Also, my daughter had recently passed that elementary school milestone that is the report on a U.S. state, and she was convinced that Tennessee was a place to see. So we headed south, first staying in Nashville. Fascinating city, all these people walking along Broadway—crowded in our hotel, too, which was just across from the city's football stadium. Lots of people checking in the hotel, the next morning not a seat available in the breakfast room, and most everyone seemed to be wearing similarly colored athletic shirts. We continued our trip, driving on to Memphis. We got there, and decided to park and walk towards the city center. Again, lots of people, and they all seemed to be heading somewhere together, so we followed, again noting people's coordinated and sporty attire. Now we saw how they were lining up on either side of the street, and coming down the middle of it was a parade. By now you may have realized what we did not, why the crowds, why there was a parade, what college football fans will know happens in southern climates just after Christmas: bowl games.

Jesus travels south to another city in today's gospel. We're in the middle of Luke's gospel here, traveling with Jesus on his ministry tour. Jesus travels south to the city of Nain, and he's not alone, his family goes with him, his disciples, and more, too, Luke tells us a crowd travels with him, and a crowd meets him in the city, too. A crowd has gathered in Nain, is lining up at the sides of the streets, watching as a parade comes down the way. But this crowd is a solemn one, it is looking on at a bleak parade, with only one float, a stretcher with a corpse, the ancient equivalent of an open coffin, a funeral bier. On it is a young man who has died. He is—he was—his mother's only son, and she is a widow.

With this brief descriptions we hear devastation: onlookers gathering around a man who had died, as he is being carried out of the city, his mother's only son. A mother should not have to watch as her child's lifeless body is carried away. Children should not die before their parents. Hers did. And there is no one to comfort her. Her husband has died, too, which means her life is yet more undone: undone by sorrow, undone practically, economically. In the ancient world—sadly, often in the modern world, too—in the ancient world life's tragedies could strike a woman doubly hard. She would be dependent upon a husband for a place to live and for means of support. After her husband, she would need to look to her sons, if she had them. This woman had one. Now he is gone, too. Now there is only a crowd of spectators, watching her as she weeps, there in the road.

I've watched like that, like that crowd does—maybe you have, too. I have looked out of the car window at what's happened in the median; I've watched, separated by distance and indifference. With a sober curiosity, I peer out at the wreckage. Enough of us do that that we have a term for it, for what happens when we slow down to look at the accident, and how it affects travel times, all those heads turning, necks stretching, slowing down traffic, rubbernecking.

Jesus does more than slow down and look. The gospel story says that Jesus sees the widow, and feels compassion for her. He sees her, and feels compassion. It's the same pair of verbs that Jesus will use later in this gospel, teaching with stories. One of the stories Jesus tells is about a Samaritan who is travelling, and who comes upon a man who has been beaten and robbed and thrown in a ditch. Then there's that pair of verbs: the Samaritan sees the broken man, and feels compassion: That good Samaritan reaches out to that wrecked man and binds up his wounds. Jesus uses that same pair of verbs again when he tells a story about a father who lost a son. The son travelled to a far country and made a wreck of his life, but then he began to make his way home. While that prodigal son was still a long way off, his father sees him, and feels compassion for him. Running toward his lost child the father reaches out his arms in embrace.

Before either of those stories, both particular to Luke's gospel, today's story, also only in Luke, this story of a widow, wrecked with grief, with nowhere to go. Jesus does more than look at her. Jesus sees her, and feels compassion for her. And so Jesus reaches out to the funeral bier, touches the thing that bears dead bodies—his very touch a violation of purity codes. Jesus reaches out, and the bearers stand still. The crowd is seized with fear. The parade stops.

One of the things we do, here, gathered here in church, is stop. Stop what is going on, everywhere else, just for one hour, one day a week. Gathered around the gospel, gathered by the gospel, we stop, that we may be a crowd of another kind. Gather here with others of our city, if you have felt that life can just zoom on by, like cars speeding past on the highway: zoom, zoom. It can go by so fast, it feels dangerous. Gather here, if you do more than sense the danger, if you have experienced it, if you know about life's wreckage, if you have not only watched, but been in it, if even now you are standing in the middle of it. It may be an accident, it may something that just happened, no fault of your own, you were doing what you should have and you were rear-ended, or worse. Or maybe you weren't paying attention, maybe you were a distracted driver, which is not so good, but not so bad as what happened to you then. Or maybe there's no reason you should be driving at all, in the state you are in. We have all been in that state, or we will visit it soon enough, writing our own sad reports.

Gather with me and with others here, if you know about that sorry state, and you are tired of wearing team jerseys that say, "Hooray, hooray, we're all ok." Gather with me if you know how hollow those cheers are. Gather here if you want to stop watching, and want to be seen, if you are weeping to be seen.

This is why we come here, when there are so many other places to go. This is why we come here, even and especially when our lives have crumpled up around us, because slowing down is not enough. We need someone who puts a stop to it. We need someone who sees, with compassion, someone who sees us with compassion and so reaches out his arms to us, upon a cross. Jesus enters the parade at Nain, Jesus enters the parade of human life, and becomes unclean, Jesus touches the thing that holds dead bodies: the funeral bier, the Friday cross. Everything stops. The crowd is seized with fear. You don't get that close to sorrow. You don't touch death. You don't know what might happen.

Here's what happens: the dead are raised. Sons return. Relationships are restored. Fear becomes awe. The crowd of onlookers becomes a crowd that glorifies God, a crowd that spreads the word, through Judea, and Nashville, and Memphis, and Chicago, and all the surrounding country.