

## SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Proper 5 – Year C

June 6, 2010

*When I reviewed my final draft, I realized my sermon was a bit too long for a summer Sunday! So I cut it and spoke during announcement time of how moved I was by the personal contact Elijah and Jesus had with both widows and how it led to a deeper expression of compassion and generosity toward the vulnerable widows in their need. I shared two letters I received this past week, one from Bishop Daniel and the other from Father Tony Rojas. The bishop wrote concerning the vibrant growing ministry with our Hispanic brothers and sisters in our Pamlico deanery around St. Peter's, Washington, and how more than 20 Hispanic children are signed up to attend one of the sessions at Camp Trinity this summer. We are asked to help get one or more of these children to camp through the Hispanic Camper Scholarship. The second letter from Fr. Tony, the Director of Episcopal Farmworker Ministry in Newton Grove, is an invitation to help contribute financially to the Farmworker Festival this September 19 at which more than 7,000 people are expected to attend.*

*"The present is always pregnant with new possibilities for those who trust God and expect miracles" – and so I extended an invitation today to do something I've been wanting to do for several summers, and that is to accept the invitation from Fr. Tony for us at St. Paul's asking us 'to come and see what we are doing. We would like you to witness firsthand farmworker's needs, and see how they are being met.' Several people told me after the 8 and 10:30 services to sign them up! I'll be contacting the Ministry about some dates we can visit La Iglesia de la Sagrada Familia in Newton Grove soon after I get back from a week of vacation.*

1 Kings 17:8-24

Luke 7:11-17

Luke's account of the story of the widow in today's gospel always stirs in me the memory of a June morning twenty-four years ago. It was my first Sunday as the new associate at a church in Silver Spring, Maryland. I had literally arrived the night before I was scheduled to do my first service. My mother and I had brought my father home from the hospital earlier in the week. I had spent as much time as I could at dad's bedside and don't remember driving from New Jersey to Maryland on that Saturday afternoon. But I do remember waking up on Sunday in an unfamiliar place. I had not yet unpacked my bags and was barely able to find my Franciscan habit and sandals – the standard garb I wore in those days. I remember stumbling through the kitchen trying to find a coffee mug when I suddenly realized I not only didn't have a sermon to give within the hour – I didn't even know what the appointed scriptures were! My dad was dying and nothing else seemed to matter.

I found the readings! They were the ones we hear today from the First Book of Kings and from the Gospel of Luke. I poured myself a second cup of coffee and quickly read the lessons.

The clock was ticking. I felt empty. "What a way to start a relationship with a new congregation," I thought, feeling a knot growing tighter in my stomach with each passing minute. Here are two wonderful stories about people being raised from the dead and here I am trying to do my best to cope with the fact that my father is dying. I needed inspiration. And I needed it quickly! And as I sat there sort of comatose, I noticed the words on my coffee mug: EXPECT A MIRACLE! For some unexplainable reason, those three words, 'expect a miracle,' calmed my fearful and anxious heart. And while I didn't have a text or even notes, from which to preach, I gave a sermon about expecting miracles.

Neither of the widows in the readings we hear today expected a miracle. Not by a long shot. But God worked a miracle first through Elijah in raising to life the son of the woman in Zarephath – and then through Jesus in raising to life the only son of the woman in Nain. The one widow had been living through a devastating draught so horrible that she, her son and her neighbors are near death. The situation seemed so hopeless that the author of this story tells us she was using what little strength she had left to gather some kindling for a fire, so she could cook a final meal for herself and her son before dying of starvation. In the process of gathering the kindling, she is surprised by a stranger at the gate of the town who asks her for some water to drink. And she gives him some. But then Elijah pushes the envelope. He asks her for some food. She had every reason to say, "Get lost, buddy! I don't even have enough food for my son or for me." But she doesn't. She responds to his request with hospitality and generosity of spirit. She did what many of us might even consider to be a rather reckless and foolish thing: She shared the little she had left for herself and her son with Elijah. And, because of that act of sacrificial giving, not only did she and her household have enough food to make it through the drought, Elijah was there when her son died quite unexpectedly and it stirred all sorts of guilt within the poor widow only because the mentality of the time was quick to interpret tragedies such as the death of her son as punishment for past sins. God's life-giving power was manifested through the prayers and intercession of the prophet.

The other widow had already known, like the widow of Zarepheth, the pain and sorrow of burying her husband. Now, as the funeral procession approached the gate of the town, she faced the unbearable grief of burying her only child. We know nothing more about this woman, but it's enough to know that when Jesus and his disciples just happened to appear out of nowhere, he had compassion for her. He raised her son to life. God's life-giving power was manifested through the compassionate, prophetic presence of Jesus.

Both of these stories reveal God's life-giving power at work in the world, even in the midst of death. In situations which appear to be hopeless, in lives where death seems to have spoken the final word, at moments when it might seem as if there's no future, God's Word makes new life possible.

It's so easy for us to get discouraged, depressed or cynical, especially when it comes to the world today and the complexity of issues which seem so far beyond our control. How can we

expect miracles when we see, for instance, such devastating hunger in the world –or witness the struggles of the poor right in our own backyards?

Perhaps an answer to this has to do with our trust in God and our willingness to step beyond our comfort zones when it comes to where we live and move and come face to face with human suffering. Jesus was compassionate in his encounters with others, and was willing to step into new situations, crossing social, racial, and economic boundaries to bring good news to a world in need of new life. If ‘coincidence’ is God’s way of remaining anonymous, as I often like to say, the ‘coincidence’ of Jesus just happening to come into the town of Nain when the funeral procession was passing by, was a not-so- anonymous way of God, through Christ, showing us that the gift of God’s life giving grace comes to us in vulnerable moments when we least expect it – and oftentimes through people and situations which surprise us. This is what it seems Jesus did in proclaiming that the kingdom of God is, indeed, in our midst. This is what I discovered years ago after my sermon on expecting miracles, even though my father died later in the week after that experience. The present is always pregnant with new possibilities for those who trust God and expect miracles. I’m not talking here about the really big miracles we’d like a magic wand to make happen! I’m speaking rather of those ‘small miracles’ which happen all the time in our every day lives if we just pay more attention to when and how they happen.

What strikes me about today’s gospel is that when Jesus saw the widow, “he had compassion for her.” His heart was so deeply touched by her grief that Jesus takes the initiative to reach out with compassion – and a miracle takes place, one which not just restored the life of the widow’s son, but also restored the mother’s future. What Jesus did in that moment is far more than what you and I will ever be able to do, but what we can do is trust in Jesus and expect miracles to happen. We can deepen our ability to be compassionate and caring members of Christ’s body.

Miracles can and do happen when we live each day trusting in God’s providence, especially when faced with unexpected challenges we’re not quite sure we’re able to cope with on our own. I’ve discovered through the years that it’s in God’s time, not ours, that our grief and suffering can be transformed into deeper compassion and care for others, and that our compassion and generosity is capable of bringing others to life through God’s power working in us in ways we often can’t begin to imagine.

Amen.

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