

**Proper 5 - 2 Pentecost – Year C – June 6, 2010**  
**1 Kings 17:8-24; Psalm 146; Galatians 1:11-24; Luke 7:11-17**  
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Author Richard Bach once wrote, “What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls a butterfly.” Biologists have carefully examined and defined what it means to be a living organism. It applies as much to individuals as it does to communities. Life is attributed to organisms that exhibit most or all of these seven characteristics: the ability to reproduce, regulatory functions that maintain the organism’s homeostasis; an organized cellular structure; metabolic capability; the ability to change over time in response to the environment; being responsive to external or internal stimuli. Finally, living organisms are characterized by growth. For complex spiritual and rational beings like ourselves, we might go further in defining growth, as being physical and mental, emotional and spiritual growth. Life. What a precious gift, yet one that we often take for granted. To be truly alive is a God-given blessing that Christians define as our life of faith in Christ.

At first glance, today’s Gospel reading from Luke might seem to be about different aspects of death and loss. Certainly, Jesus and his entourage of disciples meet a widow at the gates of the city of Nain. She has already suffered through the death of her husband, but is now in mourning again at the death of her only son. Beyond the most obvious loss here, the widow is about to lose a lot more. Without the status afforded by her son, she loses all means of support in the patriarchal society of her day. Furthermore, she loses what little status she has clung too in the community, facing the prospect of a dramatic downward shift in her way of life, pushed to the fringes of society, relying on charity simply to survive. Under Jewish law, at the death of her husband and now her son, all property that they had now reverts to her husband’s family. In effect, she is also now homeless. There is no social safety net for our widow, no social security, food stamps or pension, as we have today. Yet even today, the sorrow and pain we feel in the death of a loved one may well be compounded by pity often disguised as well-meaning sympathy. We all have much to gain from looking closely at Jesus’ response to the widow of Nain.

The first thing we read after Jesus sees the widow is that, “he had compassion for her”. Not just sympathy, and not just pity for her situation. Compassion. Compassion is even more than the deepest empathy. It is love in action. For Jesus the action is clear. Widows are among the most vulnerable members of society for whom God has the greatest compassion and care. This is evident throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. Having stopped the funeral procession, Jesus tells the widow not to weep. Then the Word of God speaks directly to the dead man on the bier, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" In turn, the first act of the revived young man is to speak. We do not know what he says, but once again, we see the power of God’s revelation in the Word made flesh, and the gift of proclamation. This is another demonstration of God’s gracious acts communicated through the power of the Holy Spirit in the actions of the Word made flesh. Jesus’ miraculous deed of power may appear to dominate the story. Who amongst us has not prayed for just such a miracle? Who amongst us has not felt deep despair or a sting of disappointment when our prayer does not seem to be answered? Is God unreliable and capricious? Is this the same God, who created the universe, the one whose steadfast love and faithfulness we have staked our very lives on? Is God omnipotent or not? Oh and at the heart of each of these questions is still one more, one that is almost unspeakable in its implications: Can we trust God?

Life is a precious gift. Being fully alive in Christ means that we are also growing in love of God and our neighbor. Martin Luther would say that it is our faith that vivifies or gives life to our good works, especially in how we love our neighbors as ourselves. In this story, Jesus’ compassion is truly love in action. He is not just concerned with demonstrating His power and authority over death in

reviving the young man. Jesus is living out God's word spoken through the prophets to care for the poorest and most vulnerable in society. Jesus directly extends God's goodness and grace to a woman whose life has been conflated to almost nothing in society's eyes – but not in God's eyes. In God's mercy and justice, the widow must be treated with love and respect, her dignity and role in community are to be restored to life. Drawing on the prophet Isaiah, Jesus' first teaching is about His mission to bring good news to the poor, release to captives and to let the oppressed go free. This story is much less concerned with raising the young man from the dead, as it is in restoring the widow to wholeness of life in community. It is just one step in Jesus' fulfillment of His mission, which will extend to all who believe in Him. The resuscitation of the young man is a tangible reminder of God's desire that all are invited to have everlasting life in Him through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

From the perspective of the crowd of witnesses, they immediately recognize the prophetic activity of both Elijah and Elisha, and confirm Jesus as another great prophet, even one like Moses raised up for us, as a sign of God's favor to His people. However, there are differences. Both Elijah and Elisha pray to God for the gift of life to return to the lifeless. Jesus speaks the word, without even touching the young man, and so it is. The narrator of Luke goes beyond proclaiming Jesus as a great prophet to identify Jesus as Lord. In speaking life into the young man, Jesus communicates a revelation of His mission to bring good news to the poor. Jesus' presence on earth is the initiation of kingdom living, and especially a time of justice and peace. Jesus' gift to the widow in returning her son to her points to the nature of God's redemptive intervention in Christ for the salvation that is the healing of the whole world.

Whatever we imagine life to be it is always a gift from God. Living well is how we use that gift of time in response to God, in service to our Lord, and in loving others as we love ourselves. We will never stop praying for the grand miracles for our loved ones. Yet we must also keep our eyes and ears open for the daily gifts and miracles of God's grace in our lives. God always answers our prayers, not always as we wish, or even as we think God ought to. God always heals us; sometimes that healing is in our new and unending life in Christ. What we do have in the messy reality of life is hope and the knowledge that the promises of God are sure. We can and do trust God's steadfast love through all the circumstances of life. God does not spare us the consequences of a broken world, one that we have each played our own part in shaping. Yet our God of abundant life is constantly at work redeeming all things. In our trust and faith in Christ, we know that ultimately, "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

We have the evidence of God's continuing love and compassion in action. Miracles happen every day. God's compassion still reaches out to us in the loving arms of our friends, and in the tears that we share in solidarity with one another as a community of faith. Jesus' compassion and God's love is still in action when we care enough to enter into another's pain in order to share the load, and help each other to find comfort, hope, and meaning in the darkest moments of this life. One of God's greatest gifts and miracles of our own lives on earth, as well as in the promise of new and unending life in Christ, is the opportunity for growth with a purpose. You and I bear a precious gift that can bring life to the lifeless through faith in Christ; offer hope to the despairing through the peace of Christ; and share God's love and compassion with all in the freedom of Christ. "What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls a butterfly." Transformation into new life is God's greatest gift of grace and healing to our hurting world. This is the good news of growing in Christ. This is our own transformation and healing by the power of the Holy Spirit. Faith in action is life.

Amen.