

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year C
Date: 6/5/16/16
Season: The Third Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 7:11-17

No one likes to think about death. A topic we would all rather avoid. Yet, it's the case that so much of the destructive behavior we engage in arises from a fear of death and an avoidance of that fear. We medicate that fear with alcohol or drugs or overeating or shopping or sex or you name it. The unspoken – and unrecognized – fear of death is a powerful negative motivator.

But death is finally unavoidable. You know, death and taxes, right? So because we can't avoid death, what if we actually turned and faced death and the inevitable deaths of the ones we love, and see whether death has anything to teach us.

One thing we might say about death is that it creates a time boundary for us. The ultimate time boundary for sure. And time boundaries generally are not bad. We need something to push up against. We need limits to keep us on track. I know if I didn't have deadlines to meet, I'd get a lot less work done. Many of us, like me for example, had the experience in school of getting pretty darn focused when final exams were to begin the next day.

We can all think of other examples of how pushing up against a deadline on a time boundary puts us into the immediate moment, whether it's at work or at school or socially. I know I've often had the experience of Zonnie and me, dressed to go out in the evening to someone's home for dinner, and having 10 or 15 minutes together before it is time to leave. Wonderful, intimate, focused time to visit and talk. And it's because we know it won't last. We're up against a time boundary.

Now all this may remind you of the mordant wit, Dr. Samuel Johnson, the famous British writer. Writing in 1777 about a hanging that was to take place shortly, he said to his biographer, and friend, James Boswell, the following immortal line:

“Depend upon it, Sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.”

Living realistically in the face of our deaths – and die we will – let us never forget, brings us into the present moment. And it is always in the present moment – and I would venture to say, it is **only** in the present moment, that we will meet God – the one who breathed life into us, the one who calls us by name, and the one who leads us forward into the great adventure of ordinary living.

I'll share with you my own very recent experience of coming into reality about death – in this case, my own death. It was on a Friday in early March that Zonnie and I met with a very capable Physicians Assistant at Group Health who a few days previously had by chance discovered an enlarged lymph node in my neck. She had ordered various diagnostic tests and as she explained to Zonnie and me that these tests showed that I had throat cancer, I felt an eerie sense of irreality. Cancer? Me? Can't be! But it was me. By the next day, a Saturday, it had really begun to sink in. I had cancer and I was going to die. The **when** of my death wasn't quite known yet. There were other doctors to see, tests to be run, options to explore. And Zonnie had been diligently searching the internet and was discovering that the kind of cancer I apparently had was likely treatable, but there were all kinds of variables and possibilities that made the "where" of my death pretty well unknown at that point.

So I remember going out on that Saturday evening to our little back patio and sitting on a stone bench. The light was receding on that early spring evening, a breeze rustled the leaves in the maple trees and the fir trees, and I had an overwhelming sense of the beauty and sweetness of life. An overwhelming feeling of love for my wife and my kids and grandkids. Of gratitude for my wider family and my friendships stretching across the miles and years. Gratitude for work that I loved and that called for the best from me. I was in that moment of being confronted with my own death, more thankful for the life that God had granted me, than ever before. It was truly a moment of transcendence, a moment when I was so clearly in the presence of Jesus, Jesus who was calling me by name, Jesus who was letting me know that in the midst of death, there was hope for life. Jesus was here. That moment felt eternal.

That's what the good people of Nain recognized when Jesus raised the widow's boy to life. In the midst of death there was always hope for new life. You know, her son's death was a double blow for the widow. Not only was she losing her only child – a loss that any parent knows is among the most devastating events imaginable – she also losing her only way to live outside of complete destitution. Without a man in her life, life would not be possible. And to Jesus, filled with compassion we're told, steps into the midst of death and calls for the life. "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak and Jesus gave him to his mother.

Did you know that Luke's gospel contains 22 healing stories? The most of any of the gospel stories. Maybe it's because Luke himself, we are told, was a physician and so had a particular interest in Jesus' healing ministry. I also think it's because Luke, foremost among all the gospel writers, hears Jesus saying to his friends over and over, "The Kingdom of Heaven is in your midst. The kingdom of God is among you." In the person of Jesus the Kingdom is here. Not far off in the future. Not after the death of the

physical body. The Kingdom is here. The kingdom is now. That's why the people in Nain that day glorified God and said, "God has looked favorably on his people." In the midst of death, Jesus offered hope for new life.

So, we're all going to die. And I want to say that's a good thing. I mean, how boring would it be if this part of our journey went on forever? Death gives us that necessary – that essential – time boundary that allows us to truly know the sweetness – the richness – of this part of life. And in the midst of the sweetness and the richness of this life stands Jesus.

So my dear sisters and brothers, on this day, Jesus offers us an invitation into a new way of living, just as he did long ago to the widow and her friends in Nain. Death, our own deaths, are not the end of the story. Death simply ends a chapter in a book that continues to the end of the age. So we can live now – in this moment – in confidence and hope. And in appreciation and gratitude for the goodness and the sweetness of this life. This **one** life we are given.

You've heard it said from this pulpit before that the words, "Do not be afraid" are spoken 365 times in the Bible. In Nain that day, Jesus showed the crowd that the ultimate source of our fear – death – was not to be feared. Do you see how liberating that is? So go live your life. Live it for all its worth. Go out from here on this beautiful spring day and revel in the glory of creation. Soak it all in. Glorify God. And do not be afraid. Amen.