

SERMON
First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota

Luke 7:11-17
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
June 9, 2013

ADULT MESSAGE

We have had **seven funerals since Easter** here at First Lutheran Church in Aitkin. Hundreds of people have gathered here to say "**Goodbye for now**" to beloved family members and friends.

Dr. Gerhard Frost shares the following writing entitled, "**It Had Better Be True.**" (It Had Better Be True, Visitation Pamphlet Series, Logos Productions, Inver Grove Heights, MN.)

Yesterday was Easter Sunday, and today I met a friend. I greeted him with, "**He is risen!**" "**He is risen indeed!**" he instantly responded, then added, "**I must tell you what happened in church.**"

He told me how he'd no sooner entered his pew than he recognized a childhood friend and playmate just in front of him.

In the moment for exchanging the greeting of peace, he eagerly touched her arm, then, as she turned, exclaimed, "**He is risen!**" To his surprise there were tears on her cheeks as she said, "**He is risen indeed!**" then added in a whisper, "**and it had better be true!**" She then informed him of her husband's recent death.

Reflecting on our conversation, I recall my early childhood. What wonder-filled luxury Christmas presented in the happy procession of days when seen from a child's-eye view! But years have passed, and now I am old. Time has brought its gifts of joy, but heartache and sorrow too.

I call to mind one special Christmas when the family news was bad. I had no heart for preparing with only a cloud-covered sky, but I knew that I must, and I did. Then I saw as never before what Christmas essentially is, **not annual luxury, but daily, unrelenting necessity.**

So with Easter. It was fun, as a child, to bound down the stairs to find seasonal sweet-treats under each plate, but again, with the passing of time, and the shadow of death over our broken family circle, I've seen Easter as highest necessity. **If hope is to flourish, it had better be true!**

Our friend **Peter Johnson**, age 64, died last week. He was out canoeing on the Gull River with his four year old grandson. You maybe saw the article in the **Brainerd Dispatch**. Peter - a wonderful bass singer, salesman, church member, competitive swimmer and family man – had had a deadly heart attack some years ago, made some life changes and recovered well. He and his grandson were canoeing down that little river, singing away. I wonder what songs they might have been using? Maybe “**Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream?**” Maybe they were singing “**Jesus loves me this I know?**” Maybe they were singing **Bible School songs? I don't know.**

Suddenly, four year old **Thadeus** said, Peter closed his eyes and both of them were in the water. Then Peter called out to his grandson, “**Swim to Grandpa. Everything is going to be OK.**” Grandpa then got that little boy to shallow water, closed his eyes again and slipped away down the river. Now in these days after Peter's death, four year old Thadeus' faith has been a comfort to the whole family. “**Grandpa is an angel now mama, we don't have to be sad.**” There's nothing in the Bible about us becoming angels when we die. But there is a whole lot there about us going to heaven to be with God. As Dr. Frost says, “**If hope is to flourish, it had better be true!**”

In our Gospel text from **Luke 7**, Jesus and his followers come upon a funeral procession. A widow has lost her only son. Luke uses the pronoun “**her**” three times in one verse. He is making it clear to us that this **woman is not only experiencing the grief of losing her last family member**, but also the **fear of total destitution as his support is lost**. You know - no social security, Medicare, food stamps or nursing homes in those days. This woman was in **desperate straits**.

Jesus “**saw**” her. He really saw her.

- Then the “**Lord**” (not just a person, but God himself) had “**compassion**” on her. This is a glimpse of how God sees us. God suffers when we suffer... God’s heart goes out to us.
- Then the Lord **comforted** her – “**Do not weep.**” This isn’t some sort of a heartless command. This is the assurance that **hope and help are at hand** for her.
- Then the Lord **acted** to help her. “**Young man, I say to you, rise!**” And her son got up and Jesus **gave him back to his mother alive!** Do you see? Even in death, Jesus can see life – “**It had better be true!**” Even in our own darkest moments and most difficult/frightening circumstances, Jesus can see hope for our future. We’ve had seven funerals. Peter Johnson is dead. His grandson believes God brought him home to heaven. **It had better be true. We need it to be true right now!**

Did the crowd believe it? They were filled with **fear and awe** – **how could this be?** They **glorified God** – **thank you Jesus!** And then they told everyone what had happened. They just told other folks what they themselves had experienced. “**God has come to help his people!**” Wow – isn’t that what we want to hear also? Do we not desperately want the assurance that someone bigger than us, someone who is Lord of all the creation **sees us, really sees us, has compassion** and **acts to help us?**

Why all the death then? Why isn’t everybody healed when we pray for them? God doesn’t want death. But, everything in the world is not the way God wants it to be – yet... Jesus earthly work among us is all about life. This Gospel text is only one of dozens that recount Jesus moving to give life. His own death on the cross happened so that little four year old, Vacation Bible School kids and you and I could believe that death is not the last word. Those people in the funeral procession didn’t expect Jesus to give life, but he did. Do we expect Jesus to give life when we are in dark and desperate places? Jesus did then. Jesus still does today – **life, hope and help.**

If the **Lord's job**, if **Jesus' nature** is to **see us** where we are, to **have compassion** on us, to **comfort us** and to **help us** – **even through death** – **what is our response?**

Those folks, once they'd experienced the heart of God at work among them:

- **Saw what Jesus did.** What has God done to make a difference in your life?
- **Thanked God.** How do you feel about how God has been moving in your life?
- **Told others what had happened.** Who do you know that needs to hear about God's love, compassion and ability to help them?

We've had seven funerals since Easter. What person do you know of who could use God's help?

- Parents trying to raise a family and never having enough time or money to go around.
- Someone battling cancer or some other life-altering illness.
- Someone who was abused as a child and still carries the wounds.
- The person disowned by one or more family members.
- The parents who are wondering what went wrong in their child-raising.
- The person with a spouse, parent, son or daughter serving in some distant, lonely field of battle.
- The person who knows that their use of alcohol or drugs is killing them and their family but who doesn't know how to get help.
- The person who just can't believe that Jesus **sees them**, has **compassion** for them, longs to **comfort** them and is **ready to act in order to give life.**

What need do you personally have that you want Jesus to see, have compassion on and help you with? Maybe now is the time to ask Jesus.

What need has God already helped you with? How do you feel about that? Are you ready to tell your story to someone who needs to hear and believe that there **really is a God who cares about them too?**

I believe that God **gave me my wife Jennifer** to be strong when I am weak, to lift me up when I am down and to encourage me when I am ready to give up. I

believe that God has **brought Pastor Bob and Darlene back** to First Lutheran to help keep me and us afloat during this transitional, new start time. I am convinced that God **gives me my sermons**. If anything good or helpful ever comes out of one of my sermons, it is because God is working through me – especially since Easter. **These things I believe God has helped me with. And I thank God. That's my story.**

Do you have a story to tell? God does. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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