

Surprising Stories of Jesus #1

Like the Prophets Before Him

Luke 7: 11-17

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This is the first week in our series, Surprising Stories of Jesus. From now until the end of September we're going to be listening to significant stories of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke. In each of them, Jesus does something surprising or surprising things happen because of Jesus. These stories may well be very familiar to us, I'll be preaching through some of Luke's greatest hits, but they are important stories for us to hear, again, in this time. They will remind us of the themes at the heart of Christian life, at the heart of the Bible; they will give us lenses we can use to interpret all that is happening in our country and our world right now, if we are brave enough to look through those spectacles; and they will touch us personally, on our spiritual walk, inviting us into the mystery and transforming power of God's grace for us in day to day life.

Our story for today and all of these stories comes after Luke's Sermon on the Plain. This is Luke's version of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Plain is shorter (a lot to like already), there's no danger of altitude sickness, and Luke turns a few phrases to sharpen Jesus' focus on the poor. Some scholars call it the platform of the Realm of God, the values at the heart of what Jesus will be doing. In this sermon, Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God, blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh; love your enemies, do good to those who hate you."

The stories start immediately after the Sermon on the Plain. I skipped one of them, the healing of the Centurion's Servant because I've preached on this story recently. In it the Centurion, an enemy, acts in surprising ways. He cares for his servant who is near death, he shows surprising trust in Jesus and Jesus heals his servant.

Immediately following is our story for today.

Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd following Jesus arrive at Nain. As Jesus approaches the gate a man who has died is being carried out of the village. The man's mother is there and another crowd. The mother is a widow. This woman lives in a time when she is completely dependent upon either a husband or a son for her livelihood. She lost her husband but she still had her only son. Now she has lost her son too.

Jesus sees her and has compassion on her. He says, "Do not weep."

The reader has just heard Jesus say, "blessed are the poor," and "blessed are those who weep," and now we see a woman who is poor and weeping. Now we will see if the Kingdom of God is hers, and what it looks like. We will see if joy can come to her again.

Jesus resuscitates the son. It is quite simple for him. He doesn't put much effort into it. The son sits up. It is very surprising. The crowd is in awe amazed, as they should be. They glorify God and then say, "a great prophet has risen among us." What the crowd in the story knows, that may surprise us, is that Jesus isn't the only Biblical figure who has raised the dead. The great prophets Elisha and Elijah have both raised the dead. Elijah has a very similar story of raising a widow's son. Rather than taking away from Jesus' uniqueness, this is what makes Jesus great in the eyes of the crowd, that he is like Elijah and Elisha, doing what the great prophets have done. Not just with the miracles, but with his values. God must truly be with him.

What is more surprising to me than the miracle, more miraculous, is where the power of God, flowing through Jesus, goes. The power of God goes to someone who is brokenhearted and completely powerless. Jesus, a powerful one, surrounded at all times by a crowd, sees a woman who is completely powerless, and then the power of God, reverses her fortunes. Jesus binds up her broken heart and also puts food on her table.

This is the Realm of God. Restoring the world. Healing the world. Saving the world is all wrapped up in activity like this. This is what God's love is bringing into being.

Some of you follow the Catholic Theologian Richard Rohr who writes daily meditations out of the Center for Action and Contemplation. He never seems to run out of things to say (that would come in hand). In a series where he is exploring how we might embrace Jesus and the prophets' call to "do justice, love, kindness, and to walk humbly with God" in this world, he writes a statement of faith and in the third section he says this:

We believe how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner is how we treat Christ himself. Matthew 25: 40 says, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." God calls us to protect and seek justice for those who are poor and vulnerable, and our treatment of people who are "oppressed," "strangers," "outsiders," or otherwise considered "marginal" is a test of our relationship to God, who made us all equal in divine dignity and love. Our proclamation of the lordship of Jesus Christ is at stake in our solidarity with the most vulnerable. If our gospel is not "good news to the poor," it is not the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the back of the Bible where all of those tiny books are you find the book of James. James 1: 27 says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress."

Even though I know our tradition and am immersed in it, I'm still surprised by how clear these calls are to be good news for the poor. The God of the Bible is concerned about salvation for the world, for all of us together.

Last month, your generosity helped send a dozen youth and adults to the Los Hogares Orphanage in Santa Apolonia Guatemala. The orphanage is run by a small group of Franciscan nuns. Throughout our time there, I was deeply impressed by the faithfulness of the director of the orphanage Sister Flore and the staff that ran the orphanage. It is clear they deeply care for the children. The children hug them and love them and they hug them and love them back. The food is delicious and there is plenty. The orphanage sends the children to school off site everyday, but there were also enrichment opportunities and opportunities for developing skills for a trade. The children make their own shoes, they learn to sew and make clothes, they have a woodshop where they learn carpentry skills. They just started a program where they hire a music teacher from Guatemala City to come in on Sunday afternoons and teach music classes on strings, keyboard, and marimba. Most of the week we were there, there was a young woman was also there with the children, eating and playing. We found out that she is the dentist. The orphanage hires her to provide dental care for the children at the orphanage, but also to go out to the schools and provide dental care for the other children in the village too.

As we were leaving, and I was writing a check from First UCC that would cover the cost of the water tank and supplies for the project that would double the water capacity of the orphanage, I told Sister Flore that I was very impressed with the orphanage. I admired her work and the work of the staff, and I told them I thought they were very faithful.

She thanked me and she thanked our whole congregation for our generosity very deeply. She had a tear in her eye as she said this. Then she said, "when people who evaluate orphanages and go to many orphanages come here, they always give us high marks and tell us how impressed they are. "I don't really understand." she said, "it's just what we do." She looked at me and said, "it's what we do."

I sensed in her answer that she was talking about more than her job as the director of an organization. She was talking about her calling. She was talking about her vocation as a Franciscan. Her life as a Christian.

She was turning to me and to us, and talking to me about our calling. About our calling. A calling we share. "I'm a little confused by the congratulations," she was saying, "because isn't this what we do?"

God will meet us when our hearts are broken. God will meet us when we are vulnerable. And God will invite us to turn towards our neighbors who are poor and weeping to join in God's compassionate work of reversing fortunes.

May God empower the ministries of the church in all its settings throughout world, that embody the work of the Christ. Amen.