

The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

Luke 7:11-17

1 Kings 17:17-24

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Death is all around you. Our dear sister in Christ, Jan Mansell, died in the Lord last Sunday. Jan's death has been expected for quite some time, but it was still a shock when it happened. Death is shocking because it is the penalty for sin. Sometimes you can fool yourselves that death is a natural part of life. In fact, this is what many would have you believe, but it goes against God's judgment, "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.'" (Genesis 2:16-17) Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and doomed all of us, who are their descendents, to death.

When someone loses their life after a well lived long life, you can fall into the trap of thinking it's just a natural part of life. When someone young loses their life, the judgment of God slaps you in the face and gets your attention. Death is all around you. It is your greatest enemy. Luther put it like this in a sermon on this very text: "On earth we encounter nothing greater than death, when the world and everything together must cease."¹ Being bullied is a horrendous experience but death is more horrendous. Having a physical handicap can be a daunting challenge to overcome but death is more daunting. Financial ruin can be catastrophic but death is more catastrophic. Death comes to us all.

We expect death for someone who is elderly or who has fought a valiant fight against a horrendous disease like cancer. We don't expect death for the young. It happens enough around us that we really shouldn't be surprised, yet we often are shocked. The Widow

¹ A Year in the Gospels with Martin Luther: Sermons from Luther's Church Postil, CPH 2018, pg 953

of Zarephath is shocked and lashes out at Elijah: “What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!” (1 Kings 17:18) She is partially correct and partially wrong.

She is partially correct because she rightly confesses that our sinful nature comes from our parents. They pass it down just like it was passed down to them. James shows us how this works: “Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” (James 1:14-15) Sin is fully born in us immediately and not when *we* are fully grown. The infant, teenager, adult, and elderly are all subject to the judgment of death because they are all sinners. The widow of Zarephath got this right.

What she got wrong is that she tried to fit a specific sin to her son’s death. Many of you fall into this same trap. When calamity happens to someone you know, your first thought is, “what did they do?” or “they must have deserved it!” Even the disciples fell into this same trap in John 9: “As [Jesus] passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.’” (vv. 1-3) Jesus ignores the question of who sinned and shows that this particular blind man is blind to show the glory of God in Jesus.

God doesn’t reveal to you why particular things happen to you. The response of the Christian to tragedy is repentance. Consider the beginning of Luke 13: “There were some present at that very time who told [Jesus] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And He answered them, ‘Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you

repent, you will all likewise perish.” (vv. 1-5) Jesus doesn’t dwell on who sinned or the degree of someone’s sin, but the fact that tragedy brings about opportunity for repentance.

Both widows we encounter today suffer the tragedy of their only sons dying. They cry out in pain. Elijah cries out to God to bring back life to the son of the widow of Zarephath. And God brings the child back to life. Jesus has compassion on the wailing widow of Nain. He stops the bier and says simply, “arise” and restores life to the son of the widow of Nain. In both cases life is miraculously brought back to these sons. The conclusion of the widow of Zarephath is that Elijah truly has the Word of the living God in his lips. The conclusion of the widow of Nain and the surrounding crowds is that God has visited His people personally!

Death is all around you. But Jesus is the master of death. With a mere word, he raises a boy from death to life. Jesus became the master of death by overcoming death. He submitted Himself to the will of His Father in heaven: death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:8) Compassion drove Him to abide in His Father’s will. Compassion for the widow of Nain. Compassion for you. By His death He gains life for you. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.” (Galatians 3:13–14) The victory over death comes through faith in Christ. Your victory over death comes through faith in Christ.

Death is all around you. Tragedy will happen to you. Regardless of the reason God allows tragedy in your life, He tests your faith to show it is genuine. Luther warns us brilliantly of the danger of looking elsewhere for relief from tragedy: “It is the characteristic and nature of flesh and blood always to seek help and comfort first in other places rather than in God, where alone we should seek it. Finally, when we have no other recourse, we come to our Lord God—provided that this succeeds, and we do not

completely despair of Him and run to the devil! It does happen to many that, when nothing else will help them, they surrender to the devil. This happens, however, because they do not know God and think that He has forgotten them when He puts some little misfortune around their necks.”²

May it never be so for us! Of course, what Luther calls “some little misfortune” might be quite big. Nevertheless, help can only be found in Jesus. Death is the way of the world since it is corrupted by sin. Life is the way of God since He is the Author and Redeemer of life. In our Gospel reading today we see two crowds. One crowd is following the way of death in this world. The other is following the Author of life. They both see the power of God as Jesus raises the son of the widow. Both rejoice that God has visited His people in the person of Christ.

The world does all it can to deny and delay death. But no amount of potions, lotions, or workout plans can deny the spectre of death. When death happens, the world looks to diversion, experiences, and drugs to relieve the pain that death brings.

The church doesn’t despair in the face of death. It acknowledges the reality that sin brings death. It doesn’t deny the sorrow that death brings to loved ones. But it rejoices in the victory over death that Christ gives His people through faith. It rejoices that Christ will one day again say to His people, “arise.”

We have just lost our sister in Christ, Jan. We mourn with her family. But we also rejoice because we know that Jan died in the Faith. She is a redeemed child of God. She will rise with the rest of us on the last die. Christ, who defeated death and won the victory over our mortal enemies of sin, death, and the devil, says that it is so. Cling to the Word and Promises of Jesus. Follow the way of life.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

² A Year in the Gospels with Martin Luther: Sermons from Luther’s Church Postil, CPH 2018, pg 952