

OPENING TO THE SOFT SPOT - 8 JESUS' THREE MISTAKES

(09/25/16)

Scripture Lessons: Luke 7:11-17; 8:40-56

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven”
A time to be born and a time to die.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2)

A couple of weeks ago in one of my sermons on taking off the armor that protects us, that keeps us from being hurt, that shields us from “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” the ways we are wounded by other people and by life events, I stepped out on a limb. I criticized Jesus. Following that sermon several parishioners, who I assume are concerned about my eternal salvation, told me that they thought my provocative comment, though interesting was probably ill advised.

Let me say that I am extremely reticent to criticize Jesus. When I find myself at odds with something that Jesus purportedly said or did, I begin by assuming that I don't understand what he said or did. This approach has served me well. A large percentage of the time, in fact almost all of the time, I later become aware that my initial reading of the teaching or the event was profoundly superficial. For this, I ask Jesus' forbearance (and also yours). However, there are still a handful of points where Jesus and I disagree. And I need to be courageous enough to identify these points of divergence.

One of our parishioners warned me that when I got to the pearly gates (assuming I get that far), wouldn't it be a shame if Jesus sent me away because I mistakenly criticized him? Yes, that would be a shame. However, if all the preachers in the Christian Church throughout the ages (let alone priests, rabbis, imams, etc. from other religions) were denied access to heaven because they said something stupid in a sermon, there would be very few preachers or theologians in heaven.

I just had a thought. Perhaps this is what would make the place heaven—no preachers and no religion! Think about it—if there are no religions in heaven (because there is no need for them), how could we have religious wars? But that's not the point.

Anyway, in my sermon I expressed my opinion that Jesus did two stupid things. Let me be clear: I did not say that Jesus was stupid. I know the difference between being stupid and saying stupid things. I do not consider myself to be a stupid person, though I know that hypothetically I could say or do something stupid.

My wife is shaking her head. I know what you're thinking: it's not hypothetical. And you are correct. I have actually said and done a lot of stupid things in my life, including some really stupid things. I still maintain that I am not a stupid person, though if you do a lot of stupid things in your life, when you reach a critical mass or number, perhaps you really are a stupid person. But that's not the point.

In my sermon on Jesus' teaching: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted," I expressed my opinion that Jesus did two stupid things. Actually he did three (the third just didn't come to mind as I was writing the sermon). He brought Jairus's daughter back to life; he brought the son of the widow of Nain back to life; and he brought his friend Lazarus back to life. I know these examples of bringing people back from the dead are considered to be miraculous healings. I think Jesus should have known better than to do this.

Let's recall Jesus' healing of the widow's son because it is not a well-known passage of scripture. The incident is recorded only in the Gospel of Luke. If we remember that Luke was a physician, we can see why he paid special attention to the healing miracles.

Jesus has just chosen his twelve apostles out of a large number of disciples. Together they embark upon a mission of teaching and healing. Jesus teaches about the Sabbath, about how we should love our enemies, about how we should not judge others. He tells the parable of the two houses—one that was built on sand and the other that was built on rock. A version of the Beatitudes is recorded in this chapter of Luke under the heading of "blessings and woes."

With regard to the healing miracles, Jesus heals the man with a withered hand and he heals a centurion's servant. In this chapter of Luke we read,

He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Now we come to the account of Jesus raising the widow's son at the town of Nain. As Jesus and his disciples approach the town, they pass a large funeral procession.

When they ask about it they are told that the deceased was his mother's only son. The loss is especially painful since the woman is a widow. So now she has no one.

Luke tells us, "When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep.'" Then Jesus steps forward, touches the bier, and tells the young man to rise. The dead man sits up and begins to speak. The mother is overjoyed and the people who witness the miracle are filled with awe and fear.

I have no doubt that this healing was well intentioned, but I still think it was a mistake. I don't think Jesus should have done this.

In the 8th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, following the healing of the Gerasene demoniac, Jesus brings a little girl back to life. This miracle is recorded with slight variations in all three synoptic gospels.

Jesus returns from the countryside where he has healed a man possessed by demons. The crowds have already gathered, for word of Jesus' healing power has preceded him. But before Jesus can begin his teaching, Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, falls at Jesus' feet and begs Jesus to come to his house immediately. Jairus's only daughter, a little girl about twelve years old, is dying.

Jesus leaves the crowd to whom he was preaching and begins the journey to Jairus's house. On the way, a woman who has been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years is healed by the simple act of touching the hem of Jesus' robe.

Immediately following this healing, Jesus receives word that there is no longer any reason for him to go to Jairus's house, for the little girl has died. When Jesus hears this he responds, "Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved." Jesus goes to the house and enters it with Peter, James, John, and the little girl's parents. Jesus comforts the parents by telling them that their daughter is not dead but sleeping. Luke tells us that they laughed at him because there was no doubt that the little girl was dead.

Jesus then takes the little girl by the hand and tells her to get up. Luke tells us that "her spirit returned" and she got up at once. Jesus tells the parents to give her something to eat. He then admonishes the astonished parents not to tell anyone what has happened.

I have no doubt that this healing was well intentioned, but I still think it was a mistake. I don't think Jesus should have done this.

We will not be discussing the third stupid thing that Jesus did, the raising of Lazarus from the dead (which is recorded in the 11th chapter of John) because it is well known. We simply note that it follows the same pattern. Jesus, out of his great compassion, brings Lazarus back to life after he has been in the tomb for four days.

I have no doubt that this healing was well intentioned, but I still think it was a mistake. I don't think Jesus should have done this.

These healing miracles are normally considered to lie at the cornerstone of our faith. They witness to Jesus' power over both life and death. I believe these three miracles really happened, though I am aware that they can also be read metaphorically. There are many different kinds of deaths and many ways to regain life. However, the record of them is so specific that I do not think that we should consider them as metaphor. I believe Jesus actually brought these people back from the dead.

This is where I think he made a mistake, where he drifted off course. I do not believe that Jesus came to bring people back from the dead, at least not literally. To bring a corpse back to life again is to resuscitate it, to revive it. This is a good trick, but I believe it has nothing with the message that Jesus came to teach and which he incarnated in his own life.

I believe that Jesus came to teach us about the power of the resurrection, the power of a resurrected life, not a resuscitated or revived life. Whatever the resurrection is, and I believe the mystery of resurrection is at the heart of our faith, it is not reducible to getting a dead body to breathe again. It is much more than this. I think of the woman whom I mentioned in my earlier sermon; she keeps her dead son's ashes on the mantle and prays daily that he will be brought back to life. She firmly believes that if she has enough faith, she can do this since Jesus did it and Jesus told his disciples to do it.

To bring people back from the dead implies that death is the enemy. It implies that death is wrong, that death shouldn't happen, that death is an injustice of some sort. I know that this is how we feel when a loved one dies, especially if he/she dies "too early." But death is a part of life and a part of our life. It is a normal part of the life process. It is not something to be avoided. In fact, when we treat death as the enemy we may employ extraordinary means of revival to keep an elderly person from passing away, thus violating the person's desire to experience a peaceful death, a surrender to that God who

brought this life into being. who sustained it for a certain length of time, and who calls it home.

I believe that Jesus came to teach us that death is not the end. There is a life after death. There is a life after the many deaths we experience in this life, and there is a life after what we experience as the death of the body. Jesus came not to eliminate death, but to triumph over it. As the apostle Paul puts it, Christ takes away the sting of death. It is because of this that Paul tells us that we should not grieve as those do who have no faith, no experience of the power of the resurrection.

It was really nice that Jesus brought these three people back to life. There is no doubt why he did it. In all three cases we are told that Jesus had compassion on the person's family. He could feel the pain of their loss. With the raising of Lazarus, Jesus was responding not only to Martha and Mary's pain but also to his own, for Lazarus was his friend. The problem is that each of these persons is going to die again. The widow's son will die. Jairus's daughter will die. And Lazarus will die. So what's the point of reviving them, of resuscitating them, of temporarily cheating death? Jesus' message about the resurrection goes much deeper than this.

I believe that in addition to teaching us about the power of the resurrection, Jesus also shows us how to die. He shows us how to die by showing us how to live. After reading Tolstoy's novel *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* many years ago, I realized that the worst thing that could happen is not that we die, but that we die without having lived. It is the threat, the judgment of having wasted the precious life that God has given us that is the true horror. That is not the way I want to die.

I would like to suggest a different way to think about death, a different way to handle the pain that attends the passing of a loved one. It is purported to be a true story.

Approximately five hundred years before Christ, during the time that the Buddha lived and taught us how to escape the wheel of suffering, a woman's infant son became sick and died. The woman was totally distraught. She strapped the child's body to her side and walked back and forth throughout the village, imploring everyone she met to help her revive her son. This went on for several days. Nothing anyone could say brought her the slightest degree of comfort. Finally someone suggested that she go to the Buddha. If anyone could bring the child back to life, it would be he.

So the woman approached the Buddha and asked him if he could bring her child back to life. The Buddha said he could. He told the mother that all she needed to do was go door to door in the village and find someone who would give her ten mustard seeds. When she brought these mustard seeds to him, he would bring her child back to life.

The woman was overjoyed. However, just before she embarked upon her quest the Buddha said that there was one stipulation, one condition that attended the giving of the mustard seeds. The seeds had to be given to her by a family that had never experienced death.

The woman went door to door. At every door there was the same response: “We would be glad to give you ten mustard seeds.” Then the woman explained that they had to be given by a family that had never experienced death. At every house there was the same response: “Oh, I’m sorry, but we have just lost a grandparent, a parent, a sibling, our husband or wife, one of our children. Our family has indeed been touched by death.”

As the sun was setting, the mother slowly returned to where the Buddha was waiting. “I understand,” the mother said softly. “There is no family that has not been touched by death. I am now ready to bury my child.”

I wish Jesus had said something like this to the widow in relation to her son, to Jairus in relation to his daughter, and to Martha and Mary in relation to their brother. There is no family, certainly no family in this church that has not been touched by death. Our religious faith does not give us a way to avoid death, certainly not by resuscitation or revival, but a way to enter into it, a way to go through it to something much greater.

I believe the heart of this amazing journey is the mystery of the resurrection. I believe that it is this that enables us to let our loved ones go when it is time, even when the time comes sooner than we would like.

I also believe that if we allow Jesus to teach us how to live, when the time comes for us to leave this life, we will be able to do so with faith, with trust, and with the knowledge that we have made the very most of the precious gift that God has given us.

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