

Pentecost 3C (6/5/2016)

1 Kings 17:17-24

Psalm 30

Galatians 1:11-24

Luke 7:11-17

Many Christians think of faith as an individual effort to come to Christ and remain in his good graces. But Christ comes to us, even when we are in no state to notice him. The living Lord reaches into our lives in both predictable and unpredictable ways, bearing God's will for healing and new life. We only have to look up and see him.

Have you ever wondered why Lutherans don't do altar calls? Maybe you're familiar with the practice in other Christian traditions. Following a time of praise and preaching, the minister calls on individuals who are so moved to come forward and give their lives over to Jesus. And those who answer the call are counted among the faithful. It's a defining moment – a moment of conversion, a moment of salvation.

Now, there's nothing wrong with being inspired in worship to make a new commitment to the life of faith. After all, that's what we do every time we confess our brokenness and ask God to forgive and renew us. That's what we do every time we remember our baptism and the corresponding call to discipleship. That's what we do every time we gather together around the Lord's table to share a meal of mercy and be strengthened to go out again and love our neighbors as ourselves.

But an altar call is something else. It assumes that Jesus is out of reach until you reach out to him. It envisions faith as a largely individual effort to

come to Christ and remain in his good graces. Certainly, you ought to have guidance and support, but in the end, your salvation is on you. In order to enjoy God's favor, you need to accept Jesus Christ into your heart as your personal Lord and Savior, so to speak.

The problem is that we do not readily come to Christ. We may have moments of conversion – moments of strength and conviction – but these are precious exceptions to the rule. The life of faith is a day-to-day struggle, and we are incessantly swayed by doubts and distractions. Martin Luther puts it plainly in the Small Catechism:

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my LORD or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith....¹

Faith, in other words, is impossible for the individual. **None of us is faithful on our own, but God has made us people of faith by the call of the Spirit. It's a struggle, yes, and it's a gift.**

What a liberating notion, that although we cannot come to Christ, nevertheless **Christ comes to us**. And, our Gospel story from Luke today is a vivid illustration of just that. Picture the widow at the center of the scene. Her grief is fresh. Jewish burial custom calls for bodies to be buried within twenty-four hours, so she is still reeling from her only son's death. What's more, the widow has lost her last remaining male family member, relegating her to a

¹ *The Book of Concord*, 355.

position of extreme socioeconomic insecurity. So, the widow's loss is compounded by her uncertainty about the future. She is shrouded in a fog of grief and anxiety. Maybe you know the feeling, or something like it.

The widow's neighbors do the only thing they know how to do: accompany the funeral procession and keep a respectful distance. Religious norms dictate that they avoid touching either the body itself or the plank on which it rests, but they don't want to get too close to the widow's pain either. Her situation is bleak, and her neighbors are not necessarily in a position to rescue her from it. Life will go on for them, regardless of the widow's circumstances.

But suddenly, the funeral procession is met by another procession led by a mysterious stranger. Given the widow's state of mind, it would not be surprising if she didn't notice him until he was standing in front of her, halting the funeral procession by placing his hand on the bier where her son's body lay. "Do not weep," he says gently, and, to the astonishment of everyone there, he calls her son back to life. "A great prophet has risen among us!" the people profess, and "God has looked favorably on his people!"

Notice that this is not a story of a faith healing. No one brings the dead man to Jesus, no one reaches out to touch Jesus; indeed, there is no reason to believe that anyone in the funeral procession even recognizes Jesus. But he recognizes the grieving widow. He picks her out, comes straight to her, and

without so much as a word from her, reaches into her life with healing and hope. **The great prophet of God is the one who embodies God's compassion for those who suffer,² and who acts on their behalf.³**

Dear church, **Christ also comes to us, even when we are in no state to notice him. He may not give us back our loved ones who have died, but he comes to us nonetheless. He meets us in ways we have come to expect: in a gathering of ordinary saints every Sunday morning, in an ancient story of death and resurrection, in a greeting of peace, in a sacred meal. And, he meets us in ways we can't predict: in the attentiveness of a care provider, in the kindness of a friend or stranger, in an unexpected gesture of love, in the face of one of the least of these who are members of his family.⁴**

We do not readily come to Christ, especially when we are caught up in our distractions and anxieties. But, **Christ comes to us. The living Lord recognizes each of us and reaches into our lives, bearing God's will for healing and new life. We only have to look up and see him.**

² See Gregory Anderson Love, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, 116.

³ See Psalm 146:9.

⁴ Matthew 25:40.