

1 Trinity 16 – Luke 7

When her son died the widow from Zarephath said to Elijah, “Leave me alone, man of God! Have you come to remind me of my sin and kill my boy?” Death has a way of reminding us of sin. This makes sense. After all, the wages of sin is death. This is why we all die. It is because of our sinful nature. God told Adam that on the day he should eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, he would surely die. Through one man sin came into the world and death through sin. It makes sense, therefore, that death should bring our sin to remembrance.

But we should not confuse death with the law. The law is what shows us our sin by telling us what God demands. Death cannot truly show us how we have sinned. I have heard pastors recite the old talking point that you don’t need to preach the law at a funeral, because the dead body in the casket is the preaching of the law. While this may sound profound, it isn’t quite correct. Yes, it’s true that death comes about because of sin. This is why death often brings to mind our sin. But death itself doesn’t teach us the law. Death doesn’t teach us to love God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves. Death itself doesn’t teach you not to trust in other gods. It doesn’t teach you to love and honor your spouse, to obey your parents, not to kill, steal, lie, or scheme to get what doesn’t belong to you. You can’t learn the Ten Commandments simply by looking at the lifeless corpse of your loved one.

The law must teach you these things. Death may bring your sin to mind, but this isn’t because death itself is guiding you to recognize how you have sinned. Instead, death must drive you to listen to the law itself. The law drives you to repentance, laying before you what is the true will of God. The law not only convicts your conscience of sin, but it also informs your conscience about what is good and what is sinful. The law, not death, is that school master who drives you to see your sins for what they are. It is in this way that you learn what death truly is. You learn that death is God’s punishment for our sinful nature. It is God’s wrath against the sinner. The law must be proclaimed so that all your false beliefs are exposed for what they are. This is how the gospel of the only true God is given full reign in your heart. It is because the law proclaims the truth about sin and death. Death, by itself, cannot do this.

In fact, people are often misguided when they face death. Grief is frequently filled with all sorts of false ideas. Folks turn funerals into celebrations of life as a way to distract themselves from what death truly is. It’s much too common for people to treat their departed loved ones as angels who watch over them, trusting them to send them good things, like helping them win football games or achieve some other life goal. Or they might use death to manipulate themselves and others. Misplaced guilt can also set in, driving people to adopt certain beliefs and lifestyles not commanded by God. To this day people still offer masses for the dead, make pilgrimages, or pay indulgences to get their loved ones out of purgatory. Death is not our tutor. We must learn what death is from the Word of God.

The widow from Zarephath was reminded of her sin when her son died. She knew from God’s law that the wages of sin is death. But she couldn’t know the will of God simply by the death of her son. God has us face death and afflictions not so that we would speculate and try to figure out for ourselves how we will cope with it. No, he does this so that we would turn to what his Word says. As David sings in Psalm 119, “It was good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.” If death does not drive us to listen to the Word of God, then death is a

false teacher. Even if it brings to mind our sin, this does us no good if we don't know what God says about sin.

The law reveals sin. The law shows the true terror of death. But the law also does us no good if we don't have the gospel. The widow from Zarephath knew God's law. She knew that the law declares that the sinner must die. And she was being driven to despair in the face of death. Death caused her to recall what the law declares against sinners. But she needed the gospel, which alone causes her to know God as the one who raises the dead. As Elijah prayed he confessed that God both kills and makes alive. God is the one who brings death as a curse against our sin. But he who alone has the authority over death is the one who gives life. So Elijah prayed for this three times. And God heard his prayer. When the widow received her son back alive, he declared that she was convinced that the Word of God Elijah spoke was the truth.

Now, there were plenty of other women whose husbands and sons had died, and God did not send his prophet to them. But this account of Elijah and the widow's son was written for our instruction so that by patience and comfort of the Scriptures we might have hope. It was written so that we would learn to turn to the Word of God when we or our loved ones face death. The Word of God teaches us why we must die. The Word of God smashes our false gods. The Word of God sets before us the living God who kills and makes alive. The Word of God reveals our Savior who alone took away our sins and conquered death.

Elijah was only preparing the way for the Lord who would come in the flesh. Almost 900 years later, when the Lord Jesus was walking through a city called Nain, he saw a funeral procession for a boy, the only son of a widow. This poor woman, who had already lost her husband, was weeping over her son. She would have known the law. She would have known that death comes because of sin. But who knows the depth of her grief? Who knows all of what is going through her mind? Only God knows. She cannot be comforted by anything else. Only the Word of God who knows the source of her tears even better than she does, can give her comfort. He who knows all our woes knows how best to end them. He is the only one who can truly feel the weight of what troubles those who grieve over death. It's called compassion, which literally means to suffer with. It is the inner movement of pity, which only describes God, the one who kills and makes alive, who became flesh, and gave himself entirely to the cross, bearing our sin and guilt in all its bitterness.

This Lord of heaven and earth who gave the law on Mount Sinai with cloud, fire, and thunder, who declares death and curse to anyone who does not abide by the words the law, is the same Lord who comes to us who are grieving under the terror of the law, and he speaks words of peace. So he says to the woman, "Stop crying!" It seems insensitive to say this to someone who has lost her husband and her son. But Jesus is the one who came to carry her sorrows. He is the one who has the authority over death. So he speaks to her. He doesn't leave her to mull over the death of her son. He doesn't cut to the chase and give her what she obviously wants. No, first he speaks. And in these words, "Stop crying," he is teaching her who her God is. He is teaching her not to be afraid of death. Don't let death control you and manipulate you as you are driven to rely on earthly comforts while losing sight of the grace of God.

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Jesus speaks to her first, and he is teaching us that when we must face death this is what we need. We need to hear the Word of God. We need to hear the clear teaching of the law, which exposes the idols and false comforts this world gives in the face of death. But most especially, we need to hear the gospel, which alone has the power over sin and death. The law will tell us to stop crying, to stop fearing death, to worship and serve only God. But the law can't take away our tears. It will only make demands on us. Jesus came to fulfill what the law, weakened by our sinful flesh, could not do. Jesus says, "Do not weep," and his words take away our sorrow. This is because his words are united to his own resurrection.

Jesus raising this widow's son from the dead was an object lesson, which pointed to his own resurrection. He, the only begotten Son of the Father, would give his life up into death. A sword would pierce through the soul of his mother, Mary, as she would witness the terrible death of her dear innocent boy. But through his death, he would comfort his mother and all who grieve death. He freely gave himself up, bearing our sin, to free us from the fear of death. So just as Jesus freely spread his arms out on the cross and allowed the nails to pierce his hands, here he freely puts his hand on the open coffin, bearing the death of this boy as his own. And just as when he bore his cross, death came to a halt when he touched the coffin.

He speaks to the boy: "Young man, I say to you, arise." Elijah prayed to God three times. But Jesus is God in the flesh. Elijah recalled the words and promises of God. Jesus is the Word made flesh, the promised offspring of the woman who came to destroy the power of death and the devil. By his Word he raises this boy from the dead, and he gives him to his mother.

Luke tells us that fear came upon all the crowd after they saw this. The word fear is used in the Scriptures to describe worship. False worship would be the fear of death and anything else besides God. But the resurrection of Jesus Christ gives us true worship. It gives us a true confession of God's Word. As Psalm 130 says, "In you there is forgiveness; therefore, you are feared." So the people confessed, "A great prophet has arisen among us." And we continue to confess, "Christ is arisen! He is arisen indeed! Alleluia!" They also declared that God has visited his people. God has come in the flesh, and he continues to visit us in his precious gospel and sacraments as we look to the resurrection of our bodies with a certain hope in the life of the world to come.

Finally, Luke records that this report about Jesus spread throughout the entire region and surrounding territory. This teaches us again that it is God's will for us to hear his Word. He causes his Word to go out so that we would pay attention to it, believe it, confess it, and cling to it in life and in death. Death often brings to mind our sin. This should be expected. But remember that this affliction is sent by God so that we would turn to his Word, learn his ways, and be comforted by his grace. God grant this to us all in Jesus' name. Amen.