

June 5, 2016
The Third Sunday after Pentecost

“Grace Comes!”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Galatians 1:11-24 ~ Luke 7:11-17

There were a few moments last week when I started thinking about my funeral ... kidney stones will do that to you. I decided that what I wanted was a New Orleans jazz funeral because it's an experience like no other. The brass band begins its solemn procession at the church, playing hymns like "Free as a Bird" and "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" ... no improvisation, no frills ... nothing but a bluesy sadness blown low and slow to the beat of a muted snare drum.

Once the procession arrives at the cemetery, though ... after the final words are spoken and the body is lowered into the ground ... the mood shifts. Brightly festooned umbrellas burst open ... the snare drummer removes his mute ... and the funeral procession heads back into town to the raucous strains of "Didn't He Ramble?" and "When the Saints Go Marching In." Folks who heard the somber hymns earlier in the day wait for the procession's return ... because they know a celebration's coming ... and no one in New Orleans wants to miss the funeral celebration.

When the procession left the widow's home in the town of Nain that day ... her son's body lying atop the funeral litter ... she wasn't planning for a celebration. She walked behind her dead son. He was wrapped in cloth bands and carried on a simple bier. He died that very day and had to be buried before sundown. The shock was almost too much to bear. She remembered walking this path before, following another man wrapped in cloth bands and on a litter. She remembered following her dead husband to his burial. The pain was great then, but then she could lean on her son ... then she only grieved the loss of her husband. Now she reasonably feared losing her very self as well.

The crowd who followed her knew her well ... Nain wasn't not a large town. No doubt they were compassionate. No doubt they were sad. Perhaps some were friends with her son. Perhaps some were other widows or friends. They must have been very concerned for her, and a large part of the concern was for her loss of social identity ... her loss of connection and power in her small part of the world.

No, there would have been no expectation of celebration, for to be a widow at the time of Christ was to have no power, no social standing. It was a world of, and for, and run by men. Women could only be represented legally by men. Women could only be defended socially by men. If her property were attacked ... by thieves or greedy landowners ... a woman would have little defense on her own ... only her male kin could help her. The law did give her some protections. The scriptures they read were clear that widows were to receive special care and attention and were not to be exploited. But religious laws were no guarantee of a woman's safety in a man's world. The widow at Nain was in real social danger ... she no longer had a husband ... she no longer had a son. If she had moved from her kin, she was now socially alone. Each step she

took was heavy ... heavy with grief, heavy with fear ... each was a step into an unknown future ... no cause for celebration.

But as it emerged from the city gate, the funeral procession met another entourage entering the city. A man left that crowd and approached the mother. He looked at her and said, "Do not weep." If the crowd hadn't hushed before that, I'm sure it did when the man touched the litter on which the woman's son lay. And when he bid the dead man rise ... and he did? The text doesn't say so, but I'm guessing that more than one or two jaws dropped.

Once the shock wore off, though, can't you just imagine that the umbrellas burst open, the mutes fell away, the horns started blowing, and the celebration began. Maybe they cut loose with some singing ... maybe even some ancient version of scat ... who knows? "A great prophet has risen among us!" they sang. "God has looked favorably on God's people!"

Participants in jazz funerals expect the afternoon celebration after hearing the morning's dirge. But this mother ... and certainly not her son ... no one in that crowd of mourners in Nain could have imagined that by day's end their funeral procession would become a street party. But it did.

And you know? That's wonderful. The woman lost her husband ... she lost her son. It's wonderful that her son came back to life. It's wonderful that she's likely saved from living on the streets. It's wonderful that the crowd rejoiced and glorified God ... and that the celebration was heard all across the countryside, from Nain, throughout Galilee, and even on down to Judea. It's just wonderful.

But there's one thing about this text that bothers me a little.

Jesus healed a lot of people in the Gospel of Luke. A woman approached him at a dinner party and poured perfume on his feet. Another woman battled through a crowd to touch the hem of his garment. Just before today's story, as we heard last week, a centurion sent word through his friends that his servant is ill. "Just give the word," the man says, "and I know he'll be healed." Jesus praised all three people and attributed their healing to their faith.

But the woman in today's story? She doesn't ask Jesus to raise her son. She doesn't fall on her knees and beg for her son's life. All she does is weep.

Of course, maybe the reason she didn't ask Jesus for help isn't from a lack of faith. Maybe she just thought it was too late. Her son was dead. But if that's the case, why doesn't she at least say "thank you?" Or if she did say "thank you," why doesn't the gospel writer record her response ... or the response of her son? When he sits up on the bier, the gospel writer says that the man began to speak. But if one of the things he said was "Thank you," we don't have a record of it. It could be that mother and son joined in the celebration with the rest of the crowd. More than likely they did. But why didn't the gospel writer tell us that? In other stories in Luke, people's healing is attributed to their faith. Or if the healing happens without a request for it ... like the bent-over woman a few chapters later ... they at least say thank you. But in today's story? No word about faith. Not one word about gratitude ... just a mother's tears before the raising and a son's random talking after it.

So, maybe this story *isn't* about faith. Maybe *it's not* about gratitude. Maybe this story is about grace ... pure, unadulterated, undiluted, unbidden, unearned, un-asked-for grace. This raising didn't happen because of a mother's faith or her son's worthiness. It happened because Jesus had compassion for her ... period. The mother didn't have to act faithfully. The son didn't have to live gratefully. It could be that both mother and son were faithful and grateful. But my point is that the point of this story is not the mother and her son. The point of this story is Jesus' compassion. The point is that when grace comes into our lives, it requires nothing of us but a choice ... to receive it or not. The point is always to be packing your party clothes because, with Jesus, you never know when a funeral procession just might turn into a street celebration.

When I was in middle school there was no street celebration, no brass band or snare drum or festive umbrellas when my friend's mother died. But her funeral was something to behold. Just months before she died, Mrs. Taylor had told us about the perfect bill of health she had received from her doctor. Who knew a tumor would grow so fast ... that she would die so quickly? We were all shocked by the news when it came, especially we 8th grade classmates of the Taylors' daughter, Diane.

The day of the funeral a quiet crowd packed the Presbyterian Church. It all felt wrong, somehow. Friends' parents weren't so supposed to die ... especially fun-loving parents like Diane's mom. We entered the church sad, grieving, weighed down with disbelief.

After saying a few words, the minister told us what Mrs. Taylor had requested. "She wanted us to sing hymns," he said, "lots and lots of hymns at her funeral." The organist began to play.

As we began tentatively singing "Holy, Holy, Holy," we looked around at each other. I had been to a funeral there before and this just wasn't done at the Presbyterian Church. By the end of the intro to "Blessed Assurance," we realized that this hymn thing wasn't a joke and resigned ourselves to singing. By the time we got to the refrain of "How Great Thou Art," we were singing our hearts out. And as the final chord of "Amazing Grace" died away, I think we actually had experienced some.

Well, most of us. At the grocery store the next day, I overheard two women talking about the unconventional funeral in "Well-I-never!" kinds of tones.

As a young teenager, Mrs. Taylor's funeral ... and the comments of those women in the soup aisle ... taught me a lot about grace. Grace comes unbidden, often at the least expected of times. We can't earn it. We can't work for it. We can't plead for it.

Go into any restaurant in the South for breakfast, and far more often than not, your eggs, bacon and toast will be accompanied by grits. If you mention that you didn't order them, any self-respecting waitress will just respond by saying, "Well bless your heart honey, grits just come." Grace is just like grits ... it just comes.

Yes, grace just comes. What we can do is choose whether to receive it or reject it. We can sing with our arms crossed and our teeth clenched like those women at the grocery store ... or we can sing with our mouths and our hearts wide open. We can keep the drum muted or we can let

loose with a riff to make the angels dance. We can keep our umbrellas closed or we can shoot them open in a burst of color and joy. When Jesus comes with compassion in his eyes, we can wrap our funeral clothes tightly around us or we can change into our party duds and celebrate ... the choice is ours. The choice always is ours.

And even though we can't earn it ... we can respond to it by recognizing that our acceptance of it is the will of God. This grace is the reign of God. It is a reign of well-being ... a reign of justice ... a reign of abundance ... a reign of joyous harmony. It is a reign we recognize when we are fully in God's presence ... and when God's presence encompasses all of creation. God's presence has no social boundaries. The crowd at Nain celebrated because the social order had been altered. A woman who didn't count suddenly counted again because God had looked favorably upon them with a sign of God's reign.

This is also the will of God. Restoring the social community... bringing people we push out of society back into love because we need each other. This is also our action. We too are called to be healers. The mission of the church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ, and by the grace of God we can.

We can do this by refusing to draw boundaries ... by refusing to exclude people from the fullness of life that God promises. We can do it when we welcome all people into our churches. We can do it when we work to ensure that all are fed, and clothed, and housed, and given care. We can do it when we work to transform unjust social structures. We can do it when we fix any system or practice that treats anyone as undeserving of a full life.

Some people of all races and genders are still powerless. Our mission is to be a people who draw no distinctions. Our mission is to be a people who recognize the dignity of every human being.

After Jesus left Nain, the people went back to their homes and chores, but things didn't go back to normal. And thanks be to God for that! Normal doesn't always mean right. Normal can be unjust. The people of Nain weren't normal anymore. The people were transformed. They had moved beyond what they thought were limitations. They had seen a new world ... they had reason to celebrate. Let us go and do likewise.

May we pray?

Gracious and loving God, we know that we are still divided by religion, by ethnicity, by nation, by age, by wealth and poverty. Sadly, we can still be divided by gender. But amid all this division, you give us life ... a full life where our divisions are healed. That is what Jesus showed the people of Nain, that life means more than simply existing ... it means living fully within an interdependent web of life ... it means accepting your grace to be loved by you ... and to love all. Amen.