

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 7:11-17

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

The opening of the story is the description of a tragedy: "He went to a town called Nain with his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother and she was a widow." The dynamic of this sentence is to build the tragedy. Everyone in Luke's audience knew its dimensions. The death of a widow's only son means that her only source of livelihood, of food, of care, of clothes, of a home, is gone. His death meant her abject poverty and premature death.

The story of Naomi in Ruth is a memory of what is associated with the death of sons. After losing both her husband and her two sons, Naomi laments, "Call me no longer Naomi (that is, *pleasant*), call me Mara (that is, *bitter*). Also, the story of the widow of Zarephath (I Kings 17:8-16) who announces, "I'm going to make cake and eat it and die." Widows and orphans were a particular concern of the prophets. Jesus stands in that prophetic tradition.

The beginning of Luke's story about what happened in Nain paints the picture of an immense personal tragedy. Jesus responds with compassion. The Greek word for his response is one of the great expressive words in the Gospels. This word is used in Mark in Jesus' response to the leper who comes up and falls at his feet and says, "Lord, if you want to, you can make me clean." Jesus *splagnizod* for the man: he had compassion on him. The literal meaning of this word is for your bowels to turn over. *Splagnizo* is the description of the movement in your body of compassion for someone who is suffering. Jesus *splagnizod* for the woman, he had compassion on her. His bowels turned over for her because he knew what she was going through and what this meant for her.

You can get the feeling of this word by noticing the other places where Luke uses it. It's used in two parables of Jesus. The first is the parable of the good Samaritan where the priests and the Levites see the man on the road and pass by on the other side. But the Samaritan saw him, had compassion on him, and went over and bound up his wounds.

The other place where Luke uses *splagnizo* is in reference to the father in the parable of the two sons. When the younger son, who has wasted the inheritance, comes home, his father saw him from a distance and had compassion on him. He ran and fell on his son's neck and kissed him. This word is used to describe the extreme experience of a feeling for one who has been hurt or who is now turning around and coming home.

The dynamic of the telling of the story is that Jesus says to her "Don't weep," which means "Don't be afraid, don't be sorrowful, I'm going to help you now." The impact of this story is deeply connected with the dynamics of Elijah raising the son of the widow in Zarephath. One sign that this Elijah story is in the background of Luke's story is the

phrase at the end of it: "gave him back to his mother." It is an exact quotation from the Septuagint of 1 Kings 17:23. It is also the crowd's response of naming Jesus as a great prophet which means a great prophet like Elijah and Elisha. His ministry to the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, the downtrodden, and those in the grip of death—those are the signs of a great prophet.

The response of Jesus is to come forward and touch the coffin, the bier on which the young man was being carried. The bearers stood still. This is a storytelling preparation for Jesus' words, so take time in saying, "and the bearers stood still." It's a short sentence whose purpose is to emphasize Jesus touching the bier: "And then they stood still and then he said to the young man, 'Young man, I say to you, arise.'" The image is that Jesus is leaning forward and speaking directly to the young man who is lying there dead. It might even be a whisper in his ear.

After this there is a pause: "And then the dead man sat up and began to speak and Jesus gave him back to his mother." This episode invites the storyteller to express her delight, her joy, her wonder, her amazement at what has happened in this action of Jesus and of this young man sitting up. It has the same dynamic as Lazarus coming out of the tomb. It's virtually impossible to overdo the exaltation, joy and amazement of this event.

The response of the crowd is the concluding episode. First of all, there is fear. Fear represents the response to an action of God, like the smoke of God on Mount Sinai, or like the fear that struck people when the ark was touched because it was falling off the cart and when Uzzah touched it, he fell dead (II Samuel 6:1-11). Everyone is afraid, in this instance, because of the new life that had happened.

Then they glorify God. This expression is a continuation of the widow's joy. But now it can be even bigger, expressing the wonder of the crowd as they say, "A great prophet has risen among us and God has looked favorably on our people." This is the same spirit as the crowd at the triumphal entry, "Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!" (Luke 19:38)

The last part of the story is the celebration of Jesus' action. What is the historical probability of this event? Many commentators are skeptical. The claim of the story is that God has the power to act through his prophets to resuscitate persons who have died. This is a sign of the power of God working through Jesus. It is not the power to take life as in the warrior tradition, but the power to give new life, as in the prophetic tradition.

Whatever skepticism you may have about whether it is historically probable that Jesus did this, if you want to tell the story faithfully to how it was first told, you must express the spirit of the story, which is the spirit of entering into the widow's tragedy, the mystery of Jesus' action, and the wonder and joy of the son being raised to new life. I hope that you can find in this story the joy of the possibilities of new life that are present in the symbolic system of the story in its original context and now.