

"Two Crowds"

Luke 7:11-17

June 6, 2010

I have tried very hard to really imagine the scene that is revealed in our brief Gospel text today. I don't know much about Nain, the city in which this scene is set. From what I read it was a town about 10 miles SE of Nazareth and today there are only a few homes there with a couple hundred inhabitants in total. But substantial ruins indicate that it was once a city of some size and importance. It was probably a walled city by the fact that it had gates through which a person entered or exited. Cut into the hills nearby there are grave sites It was often the practice that common folks would be buried outside the city walls ... And so they carried the body of that young man out of the city on little more than what would amount to a stretcher ... Out to the cemetery. Perhaps they began to gather at the home of the woman who's son had died And along the way others from the city had joined the procession.

It doesn't matter if it is the 21st century or the 1st - young men are not supposed to die. And the tragedy was compounded by the fact that this young man's mother had already had to bury her husband And now she was alone. Alone in a time and place where a woman had no means of support ... No way to survive on her own. So many came out that day. Perhaps to support the mother - perhaps filled with their own personal sorrow. It was a large crowd. Perhaps you have been in such a funeral procession ... Miles of cars snaking slowly through town, flashing lights proclaiming that you too have a part in the darkness of the day. A large crowd, gathered around death, all slowly making their way to a grave. I can feel the sorrow and the death as I simply picture the scene.

Pause

Outside the walls of the city of Nain, another procession is in progress. Another large crowd has gathered and is making its way in the opposite direction. But everything is so very different in this procession. Jesus is leading the way. The crowd is singing, talking, laughing ... And why wouldn't they. These are people who have been joining the parade along the parade route. Jesus has been healing and encouraging. He has called disciples and gathered a following of those were filled with excitement over what they were hearing and seeing. Jesus has performed miracles and taught such amazing things that the people have been so compelling that they simply know that they can do nothing else but follow Jesus wherever they can. So the crowd gathers and becomes a parade - filled with joy - hanging on every word that Jesus might speak - sharing with and encouraging each other.

Pause

Two parades - two crowds - one going out of the city / another coming in. One gathered around death The other gathered around life.

Set aside the Biblical story for a moment and just see two crowds of people. Imagine if two such crowds of people were to meet one day. One energized by life and possibilities and the other weighted down by death. Don't you wonder what might happen? If you were in one of these parade groups, what would you feel as you met the other? Would you be compelled to join the other?

I do wonder what happened as the two crowds met that day with Jesus leading one and a grieving widow leading the other. Was the whole crowd traveling with Jesus filled with so much compassion that they want to reach out to those who were suffering? Did they stand in silence as they thought about what was going on in the other group? Was everyone speechless as Jesus acted to bring life? Did they reach out to the mother and the crowd of friends that followed and share their grief? Was the funeral procession angry with the group that so filled with joy? Certainly everything changed in a moment when Jesus told the young man to arise and he sat up. There must have been such rejoicing in both groups as the first crowd turned around and headed away from the cemetery and back into the city.

Two crowds — one shaped by death and another shaped by life. I wonder if that image doesn't really picture our world pretty well. I remember a line from a movie. The actor was Morgan Freeman ... The movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*. Set in a prison, Morgan Freeman {Red} is talking to or about a fellow inmate who has been falsely imprisoned when he says something about a person having to decide that it is time to either "get busy living or get busy dying."

It seems to me good advice. Time after time in our lives we have a choice which crowd to walk with. There is a large crowd that is busy about the task of dying / moving toward the darkness. There is a large crowd that is busy moving with joy toward life A crowd that has had a glimpse of Jesus leading the way.

The Apostle Paul talks about having made that choice in the second reading that was shared with us this morning. Paul had been an angry, bitter man. I suppose he may have even thought that he was doing pretty well with his life but his mission was to tear down ... destroy and even put to death people who had seen a different way of life. But then he caught a glimpse of Jesus and a life devoted to destroying others was turned in a new direction walking with the crowd captivated by life.

Hidden within this incredible event where we often just see the miracle of a young man raised from death to life there is so much more to see. What there is for us to see is an image of all of life - life that often hold two pathways for us to travel. Life or death or perhaps the choice is between love or hate, peace or conflict, heal or hurt, joy or sorrow. Our lord comes to meet us on the road and invite us to join the crowd moving into the city of joy.

It is a great event, this meeting of 2 crowds on the road. But it is more than a fascinating event. It is the gospel. Here Jesus comes to us on the road where we are often lost in sorrow and darkness - heading for the grave. Weak, helpless - totally lost and dead - yet Jesus calls us to life. The young man can do nothing to help himself but the compassion of Christ moves Him to call us to life. Life is restored as we hear the voice of God and respond. He reaches out to touch us. Jesus calls us to follow.

AMEN