

SERMON
“A Life Restoring Ministry”
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June 6, 2010

I Kings 17: 17-24

Luke 7: 11:17

Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and 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. He was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, “Do not weep.” Then he came forward and touched the **bier**, and the bearer stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God saying, “A great prophet has risen among us!” and “God has looked favorably on his people!” This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

SERMON

During this long season of Pentecost, we are asked to consider what it means to be the church. And that ultimately, the work of the Church, calls for a continuation of Jesus’ ministry on earth.

The story before us this morning clearly reveals Jesus’ ministry as a life-restoring ministry. Jesus’ healing ministry seems way beyond our ability to emulate. Throw in life-restoring and we have to ask, “Certainly, these are powers reserved for Jesus alone? Certainly we are not meant to emulate even this aspect of Jesus’ ministry on earth?” Are we to become restorers of life? Certainly Not!!!

Yet, according to our lesson from the Hebrew text of the Bible, we discover Elijah, a mere human, also resuscitates a dead boy. So maybe, even this aspect of Jesus ministry, the Church is meant to preserve. Could it be that here today, before we have even contemplated

getting a healing ministry off the ground, we are being thrown a curve ball beyond comprehension? Are we, the Church, to participate in the ministry of bringing the dead back to life?

A funeral procession is making its way through the town. The man who has died is being carried out. Beside the bier, the portable framework on which a corpse is placed, walks the dead man's mother. Jesus walks headlong into a situation from which it would have made sense for him to step aside...to keep a respectful and ritually pure distance.

But, oh no, not Jesus! He felt compassion. And when compassion hits our Jesus there's no holding him back. Compassion overrides keeping purity or piety laws for him. You and I might have strong feelings when we see someone going through a difficult time in their lives, but we're able to contain ourselves. But not our Jesus! He breaks purity and piety laws right and left, and calls us out of our shallow responses to something better.

He calls us to be active participants in his life restoring and healing ministry. These two ministries are deeply interconnected. The work of healing involves peeling away the barriers of **fear** that keep us unaware of our true nature of love, peace, and rich interconnection with the web of life. And the ultimate shadow of fear hanging over us, all the days of lives, giving us the heebie-jeebies, is death. How the Church helps people face all their fears, especially death, has everything to do with being a life restoring and healing community.

Susan Howatch writes fiction about the Church of England based on the healing ministry of two actual priests. Previous to reading her, I relegated healing to the charlatans of religion. A friend I admire recommended Howatch to me. So I purchased her book, *The Wonder Worker*, and read it. (*This book is in our library if you're interested.*) Therein I discover an authentic healing ministry wrought with possibility.

Alice is riddled with fear, self-loathing and extremely overweight when she stumbles upon the healing ministry of Nicholas Darrow.

Alice was out trying to find a full time position because she needed more money. Her great aunt was dying; an aunt who had taken her in when her own mother had not wanted her. This spinster, retired school teacher, had come to her rescue. Aunt was a bossy old bag who could be both “beastly and boring,” but this particular bossy old bag had been there when needed. Now Alice felt obligated to be there for her. She was desperately trying to ensure that her aunt died with dignity in her own home. To do this, she desperately needed a full time position as a cook in order to pay for more nursing help.

On a morning in March, Alice’s interview had not gone well. Trudging away from the hideous interview back to her house she contemplated suicide. As she stood there confused, depressed, and overpowered by a desire to binge, the heavens opened and began to rain buckets. In her attempt to find shelter she stumbled into a church she expected to find deserted. Instead she found the church, St. Benet’s-by-the-Wall, abuzz with activity. She found herself standing by a pretty woman of about forty who was wearing a badge. Alice muttered an apology as she bumped into her, but she merely whispered with a smile, “Welcome!” This small gesture of kindness astonished Alice so much she found the courage to ask, “What’s going on here?”

The pretty woman said, “It’s our Friday healing service. Stick close and I will get you where you can see.” Well, I’m here to tell you, Alice was not interested in watching a church service of any kind. She wasn’t the religious type—not after working so hard to look after Aunt. What had God ever done for her? Zilch! And she was certainly not interested in something as peculiar as a healing service, but since the pretty lady was being so polite she followed her.

There at the pulpit stood Nicholas Darrow. Alice never had time for clergymen. What had the clergy ever done for her? Zilch! But this Nicholas Darrow seemed—different. He stood there talking about Jesus. “Well he would, wouldn’t he?”, thought Alice. She was not the least bit interested in what he was saying. She had no time for all that Bible rubbish, couldn’t understand it, and did not need it. What she needed was money, loads of it...enough to pay for masses of nurses for Aunt, and masses of sessions at a health-farm for herself. Once slim, she wanted a stunning house in Chelsea with a beautiful kitchen and a lavish bedroom with yards of wardrobes which contained oodles of designer outfits in size ten—well, twelve, one had to be realistic—and a handsome husband who loved her. There she stopped herself realizing with self-loathing how knee deep she was in the most pathetic romantic dream. She had no choice but to be realist and accept the bland future that awaited her.

Her eyes filled with tears and she started to weep. Her life was a mess and she had absolutely no idea of what to do. She was a fat failure of a woman. No one wanted to hire her. Without a full time position, Aunt was going to end up in the geriatric ward, and she penniless with no place to live.

She realized she needed to leave before she began to scream in despair, but before she could she saw Nicholas Darrow placing his hand on the heads of those who knelt at the altar-rail. He touched the grey, bowed head of a stroke-victim like Aunt. Alice inwardly cried, “Oh, let her get up and walk!” Of course she didn’t and Alice felt herself crazy to imagine such a thing possible. The poor woman was quite unchanged—or so Alice thought, but when the wheelchair was steered back down the aisle Alice saw the woman was far from being unchanged. Her face was radiant and alive with joy. With her twisted mouth she managed a smile.

Soon the service was over and Nicholas Darrow was greeting everyone as they left. Alice wished she had the nerve to talk to him, but what was she to say? She could hardly declare, “I don’t believe in religion or church-going, but could you come do for my Aunt what you did for that gray haired stroke victim today.” Alice knew how foolish that would sound. So she moved forward, but as she approached Nicholas, she fainted.

When she regained consciousness, a woman with kind eyes was stooping over her. “It’s okay,” the kind eyed woman said. “I’m a doctor. You just passed out for a moment.”

Next thing Alice knew, Nicholas was kneeling beside her. He suggested she slowly begin to get up. He led her to his office. In bewilderment Alice spoke, “What is all of this?”

“The St. Benet’s Healing Centre.” Nicholas responded. “I specialize in the traditional Christian ministry of healing, and that means I work hand in hand with orthodox medicine. Val, the doctor who looked after you just now, has a branch of her National Health practice here, and we have our own psychologist.” This chat eventually led to Nicholas coming to Alice’s home to visit Aunt with Val.

After receiving Aunt and Alice’s **history**, Nicholas instructed Alice on the part she would play in offering healing for her aunt saying, “Try to summon up all the love you feel for your aunt and wrap it around her as if it were a very expensive coat.” With this said, Nicholas, Val and Alice proceeded to Aunt’s bedside.

Nicholas took Aunt’s claw and began to speak to an unconscious Aunt, “Alice has told me about the life the two of you have shared. I daresay, she’d never normally discuss her worries with a clergyman, but she’s anxious to do her best for you. As I listened to Alice I had several thoughts. The first was, ‘What a wonderful thing you did, taking on Alice like that! It must have been hard for you, a single woman no longer young, to cope with bringing up a child

in addition to holding down a demanding job'. My second thought was that you must have experienced considerable stress and problems which hadn't come your way before, and you had to solve them without anyone to help you. My third thought was how heroic you were to try to keep all your anxieties from Alice—but Alice sensed them, didn't she, and thought you were disappointed in her. But wasn't the main problem the fact that you feared you might make a mess of this enormous task you'd undertaken? It occurs to me that far from being disappointed in Alice, you were terrified that Alice would wind up being disappointed in you. That's why I want to tell you what successes you've made of raising Alice. Alice thinks that in your eyes she's riddled with faults, but she's got it wrong, hasn't she..."

"I'm now going to recite three short prayers, then we'll be silent to think our own thoughts and wish our own wishes. When I end that silence we'll all hold hands and I'll pray directly for help.

With the three prayers recited and the prayer for help said—the circle was formed. Nicholas laid his free hand of Aunt above her, and stood there motionless for several seconds. Then he withdrew his hand, crossed himself and said a final prayer. Alice looked at Aunt. No change, no radiance flowed from her. Alice felt utterly stupid about asking God for help. Life was always so unfair. How could she think God could put things right?

"Alice."

Alice jumped thinking Val had called her name, but Val was staring open-mouthed at Aunt. Alice collapsed to her knees by the bed, grabbed Aunt's hand and leant over her so that their faces were inches apart. "I'm here," she said. "I'm here. I'm sorry for all the times I let you down by not being clever or pretty, I'm sorry I wasn't what you wanted, I'm sorry you had to put up with me all those years, but I am trying so hard to keep you out of the hospital."

Aunt then uttered two words in succession. “Dear Alice.”

Nicholas said, “This is what you were waiting for Miss Harrison—one last time to speak to Alice.”

“Forgive!”

“You’re saying you forgive me?” Alice said to Aunt.

“I think it’s you who’s being asked to do the forgiving,” said Nicholas.

“Oh my God! Why, you silly woman, what’s there to forgive? You took me in.”

“Forgive!”

Finally Alice saw what was required, “Of course I forgive you. I forgive you because I love you. Everything’s all right, you don’t have to worry anymore.”

Aunt whispered, “Best of girls. Such a blessing. How lucky I was.” With this Aunt slipped away, at peace at last.

Alice’s voice said, “Alice is healed.” She passed the back of her hand over her hot forehead and marveled that she hadn’t understood before. She said, “I was the patient, wasn’t I? You always knew there’d be nothing much you could do for Aunt, but you realized there was a lot you could do for me.”

Jesus’ healing compassion was awakened for the woman of the dead son, not the dead son. She had always been the patient. “When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her.” Jesus’ compassion grows out of his concern for a woman whose social security program is being carried out on a funeral bier. This story indicates that bringing life to the living is what Jesus is about. Therefore, it is what the church is to be about—about becoming a healing community, called to participate in the restoring of life...and called to participate in the restoring of one’s intrinsic worth.