

**Luke 7:11-17**

<sup>11</sup> Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him.

<sup>12</sup> As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her.

<sup>13</sup> And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep."

<sup>14</sup> Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, arise."

<sup>15</sup> And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus<sup>1</sup> gave him to his mother.

<sup>16</sup> Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people!"

<sup>17</sup> And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country.

See also 1 Kings 17:8-24 and Galatians 1:11-24

## **"Where's the Kingdom?"**

Probably the most neglected task of church ministry by church leadership today is visitation. The excuses abound; lack of time, the pace of life today, work schedules, kids in sports, and on we could go. But...we are not off the hook. In the church I ministered in West Virginia, one of the elderly matriarchs, Jane Price Sharp, set the bar pretty high for me not long after I came on to the field when she said, "A minister should visit every home at least once a year because how can you know what to preach on if you don't see how people live." I tried that and for the most part in a 180-some member church I was able to do that; with the exception of a few families that it was just impossible to get into their homes. It really helps to build cohesion in the congregation if each family, each person in a congregation feels like they have a friend in their minister.

Elder visitation was a different story down there. It really didn't happen and I think the reason for that is a deep cultural memory that if an elder came to see you, "he" usually accompanied the minister and the reason was usually a moral infraction on your part. Up here and not long ago elders had to deliver communion cards at least four times a year to the people in their districts. Some stopped to say hello while others did the "run and gun". The ones who stopped and talked for a while usually wound up being the most appreciated especially if they knew how to leave in a timely manner. Today, now that communion cards are no longer used, elders have to be a bit more creative in getting to know the people they are called to pastor; having get together's and so forth.

But anyway, the neglect of visitation by church leadership is quite regretful especially considering that we the church in our fellowship with one another are called to exhibit the loving fellowship that the God the Trinity is. We are to be persons giving and sharing our lives with one another in mutual affection to the extent that our relationships here at church form us each to be more and more Christ-like. Visiting one another, especially church leadership visiting the flock, truly deepens the loving nature of a congregation.

Well, I mention visitation because our passages this morning have to do with God visiting his people. The last verse of the Luke passage reads: Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people!" In both the Elijah and Luke passages when God visited, the dead were raised. The Kingdom of God, the Reign of God came upon them. For Paul as he accounts in Galatians, Jesus resurrected met him on the Road to Damascus while he was on his way up to arrest Christians. That visitation totally redirected his life. In it he received the Gospel and began to live for the purpose of pronouncing the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the coming of his kingdom which was nothing short of New Creation. He says he was someone who deserved to die for what he was doing to God's people; but God forgave him and with the same zeal that he persecuted the church, he went about proclaiming the Gospel. He was driven by the Holy Spirit who went with him and where he preached Kingdom manifestations happened.

Now, I don't want to do what some do and say miracles are supposed to happen everywhere the Gospel is truly proclaimed. Jesus didn't raise the dead man just to prove that he could. Elijah didn't raise the boy just for the sake of doing a miracle. Oddly, in both cases the restoration of life was for the benefit of the mothers not the young men. Both women were widows. In Elijah's day as well as in Jesus' if a woman was going to live honourably outside of her father's house she had to be married. Indeed, just to have a house and food to eat necessitated that a woman have a legitimate man in her life whether it be her father, her husband, or a son. Without a man, women either begged or went to work for the pagan temples; i.e. prostitution.

Elijah, when he met the widow of Zarephath it was a time of draught and she literally was preparing the last meal for her son and herself. All her resources were exhausted. She was a Phoenician/Canaanite woman and did not serve the God of Israel and expected no favour from him. Yet, she opened her home to Elijah on the promise that Israel's God would keep the oil and flour coming. Yet when the drought was over, her son died. The Lord had kept them alive through the drought only to leave the woman believing that her sins were still being visited upon her. You see, she and everyone in her village would have believed that if she was a widow and sonless, she was being cursed for some horrific sin she was hiding. In this widow's case, she had shone such great hospitality to a prophet of God. And, that death of her son would seem to her that her kindness in the long run didn't matter. Elijah as well was pretty confused. So, he called upon the Lord. The Lord healed the boy and in so doing restored his mother to an honourable life. She could remain in her home and her son would care for her and, in the end she realized that Israel's God was the one true God.

In Jesus day, the widow of Nain also suffered the double grief of having lost her husband and then her only son, who in this case, was old enough to have already been providing for her. Then on top of that was the slap of reality. I can hear her asking herself "What am I going to do now?" Not only would she be unable to live an honourable life, the whole community like in Elijah's day would have regarded her as cursed by God believing God wouldn't have left her a childless widow had she not deserved it. Well, Jesus comes to town at that moment. He doesn't hone in on the dead man as if he was looking for a miracle to perform to prove himself. Rather, he turned to the mother and in deep compassion says, "Do not weep?" Well in my little world, I'm thinking that she would have laughed at him. In pastoral care class they told us that saying things like "Don't cry. It will be okay" was bad pastoral care. Yet, that's what Jesus told her and immediately he raised her son and gave not just her son but her life back. The point to be made here is that when God visits his people, lives get restored because God himself is acting on behalf of his people to break the agents of oppression that keeps us from having an honourable life.

Yet I say to myself; "Wait a minute, Randy. I can think of very few instances when God has visited his people through the work of my ministry. I'm sure the elders can say the same thing. Does this mean the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God is not happening here? Is God visiting us or is he not? My first answer is, "of course." I don't think that I would be to far off in saying that nearly every one of us has had an experience of God here. But – let me push you – could it be that the church gathered is not necessarily where we are going to see dramatic life-changing, life-restoring Kingdom of God manifestations? For, looking at the Bible, the norm is that the Kingdom manifests in mission.

Yet, we have all been indoctrinated with the idea that we have to get people inside the doors of the church so that God can do his thing. That idea truly is nothing more than a dying institutions desperate act of self-preservation. Listen to me. Lean in here. Truly, in the Gospels most of Jesus Kingdom manifesting happened while he was on the go; while he was in mission. He apparently had His home was Capernaum. He could have very easily stayed there in a house and had people come from all to "get their miracle." Yet, in the Gospels, we see Jesus, not established, not institutionalized, but rather on the go; on the go all over the place in the midst of people. In the Book of Acts, we don't see much Kingdom manifestation happening in Jerusalem after the earliest days. That's because the Kingdom went with the church in mission. In the Book of Acts the Gospel that Jesus is the Christ wasn't just proclaimed behind closed doors in the temple. It was proclaimed outside in the temple courts and from house to house and from street corners into homes. The Kingdom work happened mostly out in the open not exclusively behind the closed sanctuary doors. In John's Gospel, when Jesus appeared to the disciples on the evening of his resurrection he said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." And then he breathed the Holy Spirit onto them. Just as Jesus is the incarnation of God the Son, the Sent-one of God, so now we share his incarnational ministry by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Looking at our situation, the paramount challenge facing the North American Church and us isn't how we can do church differently so that people will come to us. We are quickly approaching the day when the majority of the people around us have no idea of what the church is or of who Jesus is and it is to the extent that it won't matter how differently we do church inside the church because they have no idea of how we were doing church anyway. That point has all but become moot. The challenge we face is how do we do church out there in the world just like they did in the early church. We should be having our Bible Studies and other fellowship things out there in greasy spoons and coffee shops not afraid that people will hear what we're talking about but rather hoping that they will hear. And, instead of just hoping they will overhear us, we bear the onus of finding a way of inviting them into the discussion. Furthermore, is there really anything wrong with having church friends and work friends over together to your home on the same night so that your unchurched work friends can be a part of Christian fellowship.

Finally, in the early church most of church life happened in neighbourhood homes and neighbours invited neighbours to Christian gatherings. We need to start thinking about how we can be and indeed start being missionaries in our neighbourhoods. The mission field is not overseas, it's next door and across the street. Our passages today demonstrate that God chooses to visit his people through people. He did it through Elijah and Paul. Indeed, he became human as Jesus of Nazareth to do just that. That being the case, how can we be the church together out there in the world as God goes about visiting his people? Ponder that. Amen.