

At the 10 am service on June 6, 2010, The Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon based on Psalm 146; Luke 7:11-17.

“Compassion and Life”

In the biblical story today Jesus brings a dead man back to life. How on earth is this possible? How do we reconcile today’s biblical story with today’s reasonable/practical/scientific realities?

Christians interpret the story in an least three ways:

First: Literally, the man was dead and Jesus did exactly as the story says: he brought him back to life. There are those who say that since Jesus was God incarnate he could do anything, even bring back the dead.

Second: Jesus discerns something about the dead person that the others could not see in the pre-scientific-medical context of the day. The man is in a coma and while thought to be dead he is not. Jesus acts: He touches the bier and speaks an assertive, healing word and the man comes to life. Most biblical scholars today call this “resuscitation.”

A third group says the story is a *metaphor* of God’s enlivening presence in the world.

In our scientific-medical world, the first explanation – the literal interpretation of the text – is hard to accept although there are Christians who embrace this view and lead meaningful lives. Most thinking Christians don’t take the Bible literally.

The latter two explanations are more in keeping with reasonable worldviews today.

The second explanation is the medical model where something practical is done to heal the man. Within the model is the holistic, integrative, whole healing, healing touch, prayers for healing approach to life. Most medical practitioners affirm the health benefits of prayer and meditation and kind words for healing. It is likely that the healing of the man in the story falls into this category.

The most convincing approach for many is the third way because it opens the reader to the greater mystery in the story. Story doesn’t have to be factual to be true. The story communicates that Jesus came into the world to show compassion and to bring life in all its fullness.

Psychologist Jonathan Young, speaking to the Toledo Blade in April 1999, states: “The use of metaphor reaches past human language; reaches past the conscious to the mysterious and inevitably to the transcendent.” He adds that understanding metaphor and symbol can enlarge the Christian understanding of Jesus’ parables and other biblical stories.

So how is life affirmed in the story today? If we want to affirm life or be God’s life-affirming agents, if we want to walk in the footsteps of Jesus or follow in his way, it would be good to take careful note of some important details in the story.

While the overall focus is on the dead man – after all it was he who was raised from the dead – Jesus’ primary focus initially is on the man’s mother. The text reads: “As Jesus 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 . . .”

In the large crowds that followed Jesus and the large crowds that followed the body, Jesus focuses on a single person, the mother. He heard that she was a widow and that this was her only son. She had lost her husband and therefore an important partner – relationally and financially – and now she had lost the grown son who would take care of her in her older years.

Jesus empathizes with her and reaches out with compassion. Compassion is to *suffer with* someone. It is profound empathy. He is driven by deep concern for this grieving woman when he says to her, “Do not weep” and follows this statement with direct action. He touches the bier and says, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” Jesus is telling us to risk something to contribute to life and healing in our world. What can we do in the areas of death in our lives and society at large?

I asked a middle-aged business person this week how she experienced death in our culture. She said she saw it in depression, in missed opportunities, and in her age bracket in people who did not achieve what they wanted to in life. We see death in our oceans like that in the Gulf, in the evasions of the oil company personnel and the loss of work of thousands on the shore. We saw deaths and injuries on the high seas – in the Mediterranean Sea this week. These are not metaphoric. They are real but the metaphor of today’s New Testament story encourages us to be compassionate and life-giving agents in all these situations.

Jesus observes and listens, he discerns a great need, he is moved, and he reaches out with compassion to bring a dead person back to life.

Compassionate action requires creativity and will. The site “Charter for Compassion” has a bunch of compassionate stories and actions. Any action for compassion fits into the message of this sermon.

Joseph Derrough writes from Menlo Park, California: “Someone I know is very sick with metastatic cancer. I am donating some of my time-off credit at work so that this person can have more paid time off.”

Cate Bourke of East Hartford, Connecticut, writes: “Deeply troubled by the deaths of civilians in Iraq, I devoted more than 500 hours to making an art work to honor the dead. By doing the thing I love most to confront the thing I most feared I learned that everyone has a gift to contribute to healing the world.”

All areas of concern are opportunities for spiritual engagement. Every local, national and global mission we support in this church contributes to life in our world. Our church is a beacon of light and life. Let us continue to pray for the spiritual wherewithal and strength to go into situations of death, to observe them with empathy, to respond with compassion and have courage and creativity to act for life. Amen.