

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
June 9, 2013

Psalm 146; Luke 7:11-17
"Affirm Life"

Last week we had an unusual gospel story where a gravely ill man was healed by surrounding good vibes and healthy relationships, which included Jesus. The gospel story today is more unusual.

A young man is dead and Jesus brings him back to life. There are at least three ways to look at this story.

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

Second: Jesus saw what others didn't see in the pre-modern/scientific/medical context of the day. The man was in a coma and while thought to be dead he was not. Jesus knew that if he concentrated his healing energies on the man and affirmed his wellness he would rise. He did this and the man came back to life.

Third: The Gospel according to Luke was written about 40 years after Jesus' death. It was compiled from stories about Jesus handed down through the years. While this story did not happen exactly as written it communicates that something very special was happening with the coming of Jesus. The story is a metaphor of God's presence in the world. Death is not the final reality. When confronted with death, Jesus affirms life. He turns death into life.

In our modern/scientific/medical world, the first explanation is hard to accept although there are Christians who embrace this view and lead meaningful lives.

The second and third explanations are more in keeping with reasonable worldviews today.

The second explanation fits the holistic, integrative, whole healing, healing touch, prayers for healing approach to life. This is a very compelling approach. Most medical practitioners affirm the health benefits of prayer and meditation and kind words for the healing of patients. It's quite likely that today's story falls into this category. The "good vibes" approach of last week's sermon fits into this area. Interestingly, it precedes today's story in Luke's gospel.

The most compelling approach for me is the third way because it opens to the mystery of story. Story doesn't have to be factual to be true. Today's gospel

story communicates that Jesus came into the world to bring life and to bring it in all its fullness. The story is a metaphor of life.

Psychologist Jonathan Young, speaking to the Toledo Blade in April 1999, states: “The use of metaphor will reach past human language; reach past the conscious to the mysterious and inevitably to the transcendent.”

Understanding metaphor and symbol enlarges our understanding of Jesus’s parables and other biblical stories that have become familiar over time.

With a metaphorical perspective, I like to look *into* the story and see what is going on. What does Jesus do every step of the way? How is life affirmed? If we want to affirm life and be life-affirming agents, if we want to walk in the footsteps of Jesus and follow in his way, it would be good to take note of the details in the story.

The first for me is something I overlooked in the first reading. 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 ...”

Two things are going on here, one the consequence of the other. The big event is the dead man being carried on a bier, which is a stand or framework on which a coffin or dead person is placed. Jesus looks at the mother. He knows she’s a widow and that this is her only son.

In the culture of the day this was a tough place for a woman to be in. 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.

This is a situation of genuine need and Jesus sees it and much more. He has compassion for the mother and in this very act he expresses the finest spirituality because compassion is to suffer with someone. It is profound empathy. At this point the healing energies generate in Jesus. He is driven by deep concern for this grieving woman.

He knows what he will do after he says to the woman, “Do not weep.” He knows that his action to bring the man back to life is a direct outcome of his request to the woman to cease from weeping. His action would end the tears. Maybe he

wants her to cease from weeping so she can see more clearly what he's about to do.

The next action by Jesus is the riskiest. He touches the bier and says, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" Imagine how risky this must have been if the story was literal. Only God could take that risk and be sure of the outcome.

The story tells us to take risks of some or any sort to contribute to life and healing in our world. What are the risks we need to take in the context of the death-producing aspects in our lives and world?

The thread of this story is this: Jesus observes and listens, he discerns a great need, he reaches out with compassion, and he takes a risk to bring a dead person back to life.

Now we can see how this story can relate to us in the encounters and challenges we have in life.

There are challenges in global events like (you name it: Palestine/Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Tibet, Somalia, Egypt...).

There are domestic issues such as guns, fires, floods and tornadoes.

There are struggles within our homes with spouses, parents, grandparents, children, cousins, etc. There are situations of need in our churches. Who needs our compassionate care? What and who needs to return to life? What risks can we take to affirm life?

There are challenges at work. Some of us, like Suellen, have jobs that lend themselves to difficult situations daily. She meets with teens at risk. Their needs are great. There are situations of desperation, despair, and even death in all kinds of work places.

If Jesus walked through the corporations and work environments of today what would he see? How would he respond? Would he be busy? The DVD "The Corporation" has a pretty grim diagnosis of most major corporations in the world. If they were human beings they would be quite sick. How can we be healing and life-affirming followers of Jesus in our work environments?

The metaphorical interpretation of the gospel story today challenges human beings in all of life. Where is compassion for the hurting and risk for the sake of life in medicine, in banking, in investing, in construction, in engineering, in teaching, in pastoring, in contracts we sign, in boardroom discussions, in relationships of every kind? If we take the gospel story today literally we get bogged down with questions of whether Jesus could or would bring a dead

person back to life. When we use metaphor Jesus challenges us in every endeavor to be compassionate and to bring the dead back to life.

Many situations are opportunities for spiritual engagement. Let's hope that we have the spiritual wherewithal and strength to observe with empathy, to respond with compassion, and have courage to act to bring life and hope to situations which present themselves to us. When we do so, Jesus' story as communicated today will be our story.

And that is the purpose of our faith in Jesus Christ and the reason for our being. We are the ones now to affirm life in all its fullness. Amen.