

Summer Sermon Series – GOSPEL GEMS

“Never Too Late”

By Rev. James C. Ramsey

Texts: 1 Kings 17:17-24
Luke 7:11-17

Preached: 8/26/18

This morning we delight in one last “Gospel Gem,” as I conclude my summer sermon series. I trust you have become reacquainted with some of these Jesus stories, even the more familiar ones. I, myself, have been surprised at the ability of these stories to convey the ongoing presence of Christ in our life. I don’t think of them as old, tired stories, but rather as precious gems, which never fail to catch me off-guard, or challenge me to hear the life-giving message of Jesus anew. Today we examine a story from the Gospel of Luke.

--a reminder that, where God is involved...It’s “Never Too Late!”

We have come to know Jesus, who he is and the scope of his life and ministry. We know he is God’s own Son. We understand his ministry of love, compassion and redemption. Still, we cannot help but be a bit startled.

It’s no surprise that Jesus is traveling with his disciples, moving from town to town. We expect him to be about his mission...declaring “The Kingdom of God is at hand.” We have seen his care for hurting people, his willingness to break with cultural norms and expectations, his miracles. All of those things happen here, in the blink of an eye!

As Jesus and the large crowd following him approach the town gate, they are met by an equally large crowd, probably most of Nain’s inhabitants. It’s a traffic jam, Jesus and his group have come upon a funeral procession. Jesus doesn’t seem to sigh at the logjam of people. He shows no concern for the interruption in his itinerary. Rather, he immediately notices the grieving mother, who also happens to be a widow. The compassion welled up in him and he goes directly to the woman. “Don’t cry,” he says to the stranger. Then he has the further audacity to touch the bier, the stretcher, basically, the coffin. Jewish purity laws, of course, forbid him from speaking directly to a woman, and he certainly was not supposed to touch a corpse, which would make him ritually unclean. Then he does the unthinkable – he speaks directly to the deceased boy. “Young man, get up!”

It’s hard to imagine such a scene – hard to comprehend the feelings and emotions

of the crowd as they watched this scene so rapidly develop. The text says, “Fear seized all of them.” Everyone was touched, astounded, or shaken by the experience – all of those following Jesus, along with his disciples, those in the funeral procession and people from the town, and not least of all the mother and her son. They glorified God for what happened, calling Jesus a great prophet. And word spread – not just locally, not just in Galilee, but the author notes “throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.” The news traveled far enough to reach the ears of another prophet, namely John the Baptist. We discover this in the very next scene!

--immediately upon hearing their report, John sends two of his own disciples back to question Jesus. They found Jesus busy about his work, *curing many of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and bestowing sight to the blind*. John’s disciples identified themselves, and posed the question, “Are you the one, or should we look for another?” I love Jesus’ answer. [You know Jesus rarely answers in a straightforward, simple way – but his answers are always pregnant with meaning, and three steps ahead of the original question!] This is what Jesus says:

“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.”

Have you ever felt like you were at the end of your rope? That you had lost your vision...that you would never do something again...that you were beyond saving...that you had spent your last chance? Have you felt trapped, forgotten, entombed? When have you conceded to something or someone, because it was just too late...the chance for saving, for redemption was past?

I suspect most of us have had such times, when something is all but buried...thought to be dead...or something about yourself you have left for dead.

Have you ever treated things in your life as though they are beyond repair, can never be reclaimed? This relationship is over. This life of faith has ended. My time of happiness will never return. It’s too late, now, to feel the way I once felt or to be what I could have been. When have you said, “It’s too late...I’ve closed that chapter, the door is shut, the tomb is sealed? That part of me is totally dead, period. End of sentence.

African American preachers are fond of saying -- "where we put a period ... God puts a comma." Where we say, “It’s too late.” Jesus says, “It’s never too late.”

That's what Jesus said to the widow at Nain. "It's not too late...It's never too late."

Raising the dead was and is a prophetic sign – it showed that God's kingdom was breaking in. This prophetic sign showed up generations before in a story about the prophet Elijah. The old prophet said the same thing... "It's never too late," to a different widow, the widow of Zarephath.

The Gospel of Luke makes it easy for us to see the parallel. As Elijah had given the son back to the mother, so Jesus, too, gave the son back to the mother. Luke further invites us to imagine yet another parallel, another story he will place at the end of his gospel...a story about yet another dead son, and a grieving, widowed mother. In this final case, though, the funeral was three days past, the body already laid in a tomb, covered in spices, and left to decompose with all her hopes and dreams and also those of the people who had followed him.

From the story of the widow of Zarephath to that of the widow of Nain, all the way to the widow named "Mary" from Nazareth, we learn that, with God...it's never too late. God can redeem, God will save. Nothing is impossible for God.

I leave you with a brief illustration from history. I share this in honor of our Rally Day, the kickoff of our Fall Sunday School and Youth Group, which we'll mark next Sunday!

Dwight L. Moody was 17 years old when he was converted to Christianity in April of 1855. This happened when his Sunday school teacher, Edward Kimball, talked to him about how much God loved him. Moody would go on to become one of the most famous evangelists of the 19th century. However, his first application for church membership, in May 1855, was rejected. He was not received as a church member until a year later, in May of 1856. As his teacher, Edward Kimball, stated:

"I can truly say, and in saying it I magnify the infinite grace of God as bestowed upon him, that I have seen few persons whose minds were spiritually darker than was his when he came into my Sunday School class; and I think that the committee of the Mount Vernon Church seldom met an applicant for membership more unlikely ever to become a Christian of clear and decided views of Gospel truth, still less to fill any extended sphere of public usefulness."

Moody, of course, gained great renown as a preacher, speaking in packed halls in

this country and overseas, inspiring many to faith. Later in his career, Moody was once asked to preach a funeral sermon. He searched the gospels to find a funeral sermon that Jesus himself had preached. Moody wrote, "I hunted through the four gospels trying to find one of Christ's [own] funeral sermons, but I couldn't find any. I found he broke up every funeral he ever attended! He never preached a funeral sermon in the world. Death couldn't exist where he was. When the dead heard his voice, they sprang to life."

Whatever holds you, has defeated you, has made you concede...It's NOT too late – when God is around, it's never too late. In Jesus we see the God of resurrection. The story is seldom over when we think it is. Even where there is death, there can be life.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.