

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

June 10, 2007

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How many like a good scary movie? I have to admit that I tend to like them and have watched quite a few. Often, what makes them scary is not only the suspense, but also the villain coming back to life. For example, there were many Jason movies, or Friday the thirteenth if you are not familiar with the character named Jason. He seemed to be dead at the end of the movie yet somehow he was able to come back for another movie. These movies may scare me in the moment; I know they are not real. I can tell myself that people who are dead stay dead and go on with my day. The people in our gospel for today could not do that. They actually saw someone come back to life. They could tell each other that the dead stay dead but right in front of their eyes this unnamed man came back to life and started talking to them. This had to be a terrifying experience for them and they had to be wondering what was really happening. Since Jesus was not known for trying to scare people, something else must be happening. In fact, in this short lesson for today many things are happening at the same time. If we closely this text we can see that Jesus was trying to make a radical statement against the purity system of his time on a number of levels.

We do not need to dig very deep to see the clear parallels being made between Jesus and the prophets, especially to the prophet Elijah, who we heard about in the first lesson. They both brought back someone from the dead and both of the men brought back were sons of widows. The town of Nain where Jesus performed this miracle was very near the area where Elijah performed his miracle. An intentional pairing of the two stories, it seems. The crowd must have known the Elijah story because they immediately made the connection and declared Jesus to be a prophet among them. Establishing himself as a prophet became an important part of his ministry but it also makes his actions more radical.

When Jesus is seen as a prophet, he would be expected to act like a holy man, maintaining strict boundaries and following the purity codes of his time closely. The purity codes contained had many rules about how a person was to behave, what kinds of activities to could engage in and who to associate with.

The first violation of these purity codes was the fact that Jesus touched a dead man and it was a big violation. The dead were considered extremely unclean and touching the dead would require a person to complete many rituals to become clean again. The text does not give us any evidence of Jesus taking part in these rituals so he would remain unclean. If he had convinced any of the religious leaders he was a prophet by bringing someone back from the dead, the act of making and keeping himself unclean would have undone that act and plummeted him into the ranks of the unrighteous. Of course we know that Jesus did not concern himself with the opinions of the religious leaders. He was constantly challenging their attitudes and behaviors. Later in Luke, Jesus is quoted as saying, "Woe to you Pharisees, for you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without realizing it."

Jesus' challenge does not stop with the touching of a dead man. He also conversed with a questionable woman. The woman in the story is not named like we see with many women. We do know that she is a widow and that the man who had died was her only son. In this day and age, we may feel sad for her, but as you may know, society was quite different in Jesus time. A woman belonged to a household, first to her fathers' and then to her husband's. If her husband died, she could be supported if she had sons. A son would take her into his household and take responsibility for her. So we can see that the woman in our story was in dire straights, with no means of supporting herself since all the men in her life were dead. This placed the women at the bottom of the social scale. She became a person a holy man would not interact with because her social status made her cleanliness questionable.

Again Jesus was not concerned about the opinions of others. And we are probably not surprised that he chose to interact with this woman. We have heard many stories of Jesus choosing to interact with the outcasts of society. He did not just interact with women, he dined with them rather than relegating them to the kitchen. We may not fully understand how radical this was in a world where we hold the ideal of nondiscrimination but it was huge in a world ruled by purity codes. Jesus was violating the rules of who men were supposed to interact with, moving beyond the codes strict boundaries. And this angered those around him as we see when he is often charged with eating with tax collectors and sinners.

Beyond just challenging the system by interacting with a women, Jesus also challenged his society in other ways. The text tells us that Jesus had compassion for the woman. The word that is translated compassion is the plural form of a noun that in its singular form means womb. So to feel compassion is not just a simple feeling of the heart or a thought of the head. It goes beyond that to the core of our being. It is standing with someone to the point of feeling moved by the suffering of another in our gut and then feeling moved to do something about it. Jesus gives us a glimpse here into the character of God fueling his own ministry. Marcus Borg provides us with many powerful images springing from saying God is womblike. Like a womb, God is the mother who gives us birth. As a mother loves the children of her womb, so God loves us and feels for us, for all her children. Compassion then has nuances of giving life, nourishing, caring, perhaps embracing and encompassing. For Jesus, this is the central quality of God, what is meant by the phrase to love. Compassion is the central quality of a life faithful to God the compassionate one.

So Jesus, in one act of raising a man from the dead turns much of the purity code on its head. Jesus replaces the purity system and its concern for holiness with a central ethic of being compassionate. He replaces a system of exclusion and strict boundaries with one of inclusion and openness. He provides an alternative vision of inclusive community. We are then called to move forward with this new form of community. Rather than being concerned about being holy, or perfect, Jesus calls us to be compassionate. We are to be womblike like God is womblike. We are called to challenge the rugged individualism of our society by really seeing others and standing with them from the depths of our belly. When Jesus raised the dead man, he gave her back to his mother. Jesus' act of compassion not only gave her back her son, but also gave her back her life. Her status was suddenly restored as she now has a means of support. This action contains power. Not the type of power that is over others but the kind that can change lives. This is the power that sustains our efforts at

compassion. Our compassion is connected to God's limitless compassion and this is the God in whom we trust.

What would our society look like if this power was fully enacted? How beautiful would life be? Perhaps you remember the images of the New Jerusalem where there will be no mourning and God will wipe every tear from our eyes. This is God's coming reign. We may not be there yet but the promise is there, maybe within our grasp and our faith rest on this promise for we know that God is the one who keeps promises. This is our good news for today!

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