

When He Calls Me, I Will Answer *Luke 7:11-17*

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My Nebraska father-in-law died in May 2011, about a month before he would get a notice from the Gage County clerk that it was time to renew his driver's license. If he had lived to present himself at the clerk's office, he would have been 102.

Now that I read the obituaries with real interest, I've noticed that almost nobody dies. Instead, they "pass away." Or, even more awkwardly, they "pass." No indication of where they might be passing to, just "pass." Except for the woman whose death was reported a couple of summers ago in the Herald-Leader. The obituary said that she had "passed on July 10 and gone to be with Jesus in Atlanta." This evolution of language is no doubt intended to soften the hard words, helping to keep actual dying at arm's length. Something we've been working on for a long time. "Passing" language might have fit in my father-in-law's case, since he died quickly and quietly not long after enjoying a good breakfast, more than a century after his birth. But I think "pass" doesn't work as well for people like, say, Veronica Rutledge, accidentally shot and killed with her own gun last month by her two-year old while shopping at an Idaho Wal-Mart, or the high school student and buddies wrapped around a tree at 3:30 a.m. in rural Fayette County. In such cases, "passed" is just too gentle. It doesn't do it. And I suspect it might not do it, either, for the widow's only son, whose life was snatched from him long before his mother was ready to let him go.

As best I can understand the Bible, death is always a crisis. Not necessarily a tragedy, but always a crisis, even when it's welcome, even when it's a relief. It may not seem like a crisis when someone dies quietly, full of years, but it is nevertheless a crisis for the one who's died. Because, of course, it's a moment of ending, a real ending. Whatever is undone is left undone. And even when there seems to be nothing left unfinished, nothing that still remains to be repaired, death is a crisis.

Maybe just because crises upset us, we feel inclined to pretend that they're not crises. Somewhere—maybe from the Greeks—Christians borrowed the idea that a person is made up of detachable parts. At the moment of death, the body dies, but the spirit lives on. If that should be the case, then maybe death is not a crisis—or, at least not such a big deal for the one whose soul has been liberated from the body. But it's another thing if death claims the whole person, body and soul.

In Jesus' time, there was a division among Jewish believers about what happens to one who has died. The Sadducees were the more orthodox party, believing that life simply ended. The Pharisees, who are the forebears of modern Judaism, represented a view that had gained traction in the period between the Old and New Testaments. And the Pharisees believed that, in the final consummation, there would be a general resurrection. The Christian view is related to both, but not quite the same as either one. Christian faith takes its cue specifically from a particular instance of resurrection, and that is the resurrection of the Lord. It's not that we've been programmed to keep on keeping on after dying, the soul simply shedding the burden of the body. No. Resurrection implies something quite different. The dead are just dead, and nothing is going to change that but an act of God. Thus, crisis.

As for the survivors, though, “crisis” isn’t always the best word—not in every case. It was hardly a surprise when my father-in-law died, and the tears shed were not bitter tears. But there were tears, of course, and tears are entirely appropriate. Sometimes well-meaning folks try to talk us out of our tears, but surely they are misguided. Because those who are left behind are not immune to the shock of an ending, no matter how braced for it they may have been.

Those who experience the death of someone in the family, or a friend, are likely to encounter a whole bundle of emotions. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross studied the grieving process and identified five stages of grief, each stage followed in more or less predictable order by the next one. But anyone who has come anywhere close to grief has probably learned that it’s not always so neat. It may help to separate the components of grief for the sake of discussion, but grief is frequently not an orderly process. Rather, it’s often all over us, all the “stages” cascading down at once. And one component of that perfect storm is likely to be anger. A little anger, or a lot.

I wonder about the widow in the village of Nain, stumbling to keep up with her son’s funeral procession. We know absolutely nothing personal about her, of course, but maybe it’s fair to speculate a little. In those days, life was typically short, and old age was rare. We don’t know how old her son was, but Jesus called him, “Young man.” His widowed mother was more likely in her thirties or forties than in her sixties or seventies. Without a male relative to lean on, she would find herself extremely vulnerable. It may be that her bitter sorrow, her deep sadness, might have overwhelmed any thought of her own welfare. But she wouldn’t have been entirely out of line were she, sooner or later, to feel angry at finding herself so bereft, so wounded, and so helpless.

Anger isn’t always rational, but that doesn’t mean it’s inappropriate. Pastors and others do well to take that into account. A pastor who had served in Kentucky and moved away received a letter from another widow—a woman the pastor had met here after she had visited the church for the first time. The pastor remembered her story. Widowed early, a single mother. She had started her own science-oriented business with much success. She’d had a grandson who’d been both her buddy and her intended successor. The former pastor received this letter from her several years after leaving Kentucky: “Dear Rev. So-and-So: You may remember a time a few years ago when you came to call on me after I had lost my twenty-two year-old grandson to a death that could not be explained by any of the doctors who treated him. I met you with the irate accusation that I was angry with your God. What you said at the time was that you had come to tell me that it was all right to be angry with God.”

It is, isn’t it? All right to be angry with God? The Bible includes a good deal of uncensored anger directed toward the heavens. “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?” or “You have made us like sheep for slaughter.... You have sold your people for a trifle . . .,” and “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” and, maybe “My God, my God, why have *you* forsaken me?” To be angry with God is, after all, to have some kind of relationship with God. Better to speak it than to choke on it. Better to be in an adversarial relationship with God than in no relationship at all. (I suspect that a good many who proclaim themselves to be atheists are, in fact, angry and getting even.)

There’s a little more to the story of the widow angry at God. Her grandson was not only her intended successor, but the two of them shared an interest in science fiction.

They were working on a science fiction novel together when he died. She finished it and had it published under his name. The woman told her former pastor that she was working on a second novel, also science fiction. The plot involves people who have traveled from the earth to another planet, where they meet other living beings. The humans are trying to explain God to these extra-terrestrial beings. And how do they do it? With a photo, a picture of Michelangelo's sculpture of the Pieta—the body of the crucified Jesus, lying limp in his mother's arms.

What's going on with this woman? Somehow this widow had moved from anger with a God who seemed indifferent or heedlessly manipulative to an entirely different vision of God. A vision of God as One who joins us in the cross-shaped places, joins us in the crises marked by the most profound grief and anger and sense of godforsakenness. The God of the cross-shaped places, she says in her novel, is who God is. Was she wrong?

Jesus and his disciples and others following them were passing through the village of Nain, only to run into the funeral procession. Jesus assessed the situation, identified the chief mourner, and, Luke says, "He had compassion for her." Addressing her, he said, "Do not weep." John Carroll thinks the Greek is better translated "Do not go on weeping." We hear Jesus' words, but not the tone of voice. Is Jesus gently scolding her for her tears, do you think? Encouraging her to keep a stiff upper lip? To think positively? To look on the bright side? To count her blessings? Or is he, like so many others, hoping that she will just put her grief away for a while to spare others from being exposed to it?

I don't think his words should be heard in any of those ways. He was not setting expectations for a certain kind of uptight Anglo-Saxon restraint. I think he was speaking as a parent might speak to a child who wakens in the night, disturbed by a bad dream. The tone and demeanor would speak louder than the actual words. The parent who says, "Don't cry" just means, "I'm here. I love you. It'll be okay."

Jesus stepped forward, interrupted the procession, and actually called out to the corpse: "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The mourners might have been utterly puzzled or heard it as an act of grandiosity and insensitivity. The dead, after all, neither see nor hear. But, Luke tells us, "The dead man sat up and began to speak. . . ."

Is it wise to doubt that the Holy God has the power to repair the world? To set it right? To overcome the power of death to cancel us out and plunge us into eternal silence? To doubt that God has the power to fashion a new creation? The whole point of the Gospel writers is to testify to their conviction that wherever Jesus was, God's strength, God's determination, God's power to make a new creation made itself felt and seen and heard and tasted. God's reign, God's dominion, God's kingdom, was at work in and through Jesus, wherever he went. In the new creation, all tears will be wiped away, and all manner of brokenness will be repaired. For now, we have only glimpses of that new creation yet to come, made manifest for a moment on that day in Nain. A widow, as good as dead in her grief, hears a voice: "I'm here. I love you. It'll be okay." A dead son, past feeling or hearing anything ever again, quickening to the sound of Jesus' voice.

Did any of you ever go to church camp? I went a few times. What lingers long after the campfires are out are the songs. One that I shall never forget goes like this: "When he calls me, I will answer. When he calls me, I will answer. When he calls me, I will answer, I'll be somewhere listening for my name."