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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
6/6/2010, Pentecost 2C
1 Kings 17:17-24, Galatians 1:11-24, Luke 7:11-17

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹³And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.” (Luke 7:13, RSV)

Life is a sweet thing. This is a sermon about an increase of life, a bursting forth of life.

Two of today’s Bible Lessons are miracles of raising the dead. In our First Lesson, we read about Elijah restoring life to the widow of Zarephath’s son. And our Gospel Lesson tells the story of Jesus raising up the son of the widow of Nain. But besides these two happy stories, we also have the story of another kind of resurrection -- an increase of life *in this present life*. I mean St. Paul’s conversion. Paul tells the story himself in our Lesson from Galatians Chapter One. I want to focus on the story of Paul, but let me begin with a word or two about the widow of Nain.

Our text speaks of tears:

¹³And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.” (Luke 7:13, RSV)

Naturally she wept. The young man on the funeral bier had once been a child on her lap, a little boy who loved her, threw his arms about her neck, and babbled happily away about whatever was on his mind -- toys and puppies and such. Let us imagine him then as innocent, trusting, so full of hope for the future. Now she is bereft. There is a whole world of sorrow in those few words describing the funeral procession:

¹²As [Jesus] drew near to the gate of the city, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow... (Luke 7:12, RSV)

Her only son, “and she was a widow.” Gone now are two men in her life, two companions she would have been glad to have all her life. It was bad enough when her husband had died. Bad it was indeed when that man had closed his eyes, took his last breath, and departed, taking life and love and much of her security with him. But at least she had been able to find some comfort in her son. She had been able to give him a hug, to continue her life of love by loving her son, to comfort him and care for him and to face the future with her son at her side. But now he too is gone. The one she had counted on, not only for help in a hard world, but

also for conversation and fellowship as she aged, well, now he too is gone. Who could blame her if she should feel desolate? Who cannot understand her tears?

For the mother, yes, tears are right. But as for the boy himself, he is in the good hands of God. When the lad died, through God's grace, the funeral procession through the village is matched by a much more glorious procession to heaven. St. John Chrysostom speaks of such a heavenly procession in one of his homilies. Why would we grieve, he wonders, if one of us were summoned to the palace?

Say, if as we sit together, the Emperor were to send and invite some one of us to the palace, would it be right, I ask, to weep and mourn? [So it is in the death of the believer:] Angels are present, commissioned from heaven and come from thence, sent from the King Himself to call their fellow servant, and say, dost thou weep?... For as the sun arises clear and bright, so the soul, leaving the body with a pure conscience, shines joyously. Not such the spectacle of Emperor as he comes in state to take possession of the city (epibainonta poleos), not such the hush of awe, as when the soul having quitted the body is departing in company with Angels. Think what the soul must then be! in what amazement, what wonder, what delight! Why mournest thou? (Chrysostom, on the raising of Tabitha, Acts 9)

Well and good. Chrysostom is right: for the lad heading to heaven, we need not grieve.

But his mother! She is left lonely, and for her it is right to grieve. Only, this is the day when her grief is changed to joy, for this is the day when Jesus passes by and restores her son to her.

Naturally, it is easy to imagine her relief and her joy. But there is another kind of relief and joy that can touch the human heart -- yea, can touch even the heart of the angels. I mean the conversion of the sinner. Jesus spoke of this joy in heaven:

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. (Luke 15:7, KJV)

For this kind of abundance of life, let us consider St. Paul. He speaks of his conversion in today's reading from Galatians.

I am interested in St. Paul's story because in a sense, he was both the best of men and the worst of them. In his story, I think there is room to find ourselves, however good or bad we should be.

That Paul was a good man even prior to his conversion is something that he himself declares. His former goodness no longer matters to him, in fact he likens it

to rubbish¹, yet it must have been pretty impressive, even inspiring to others. For Paul had been a pious man even before coming to Christ. He was a zealous man. Nothing lukewarm about him. His heart knew fire and passion for the Lord:

¹⁴I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.

King David fell into sin with Bathsheba, but this man, Paul, did no such thing. Peter denied his Lord, and Judas betrayed his Master, yet Paul was not such a disloyal one. About Paul there was a kind of purity. He was like Sir Galahad himself. Paul had been a good young man, I say, yet that day when he was thrown to the ground by a blinding light, well, that day he began the process of rising up an even *better* man.

And such could be true for you too, though you are already an honorable man, already an honorable woman. So it could have been for the rich young man whom Jesus loved. The man walked away from Jesus, “for he had great possessions².” But I wish he had not walked away. Christ, who called fishermen and made them apostles, could likewise have made that rich young man a champion for God’s kingdom. But the man walked away. He was good young man, yet not as good as Christ could have made him.

It is so with you and me too. We might have done alright for ourselves so far. We might have earned a good reputation, we might have brought pride to our parents and hope to our city. Yet I swear that Christ can make us even better.

That is the glory and point of Baptism. Why, consider little Colin Edward Morton, to be baptized before our very eyes just a few minutes from now. He is already the best of little boys, I am sure Debra and Jeff can testify to that. But in his Baptism, his parents, godparents, and our whole congregation will be entrusting him to our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. And this will be a very good thing we do. It should mean that Colin is blessed with both the encouragement and the guidance of Christ, who will surely lead him into righteousness and goodness if he is willing.

Likewise, consider the lovely group of people listed in this morning’s worship folder who are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of their Holy Confirmations here at Immanuel half a century ago. When they were Confirmed, these folk publicly said Yes to their Baptisms. Many of them were baptized as infants. They were too little then to affirm their Baptisms. But on their Confirmation Sunday so

¹ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. (Philippians 3:8-9, NRSV)

² Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. ²²But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions. (Matthew 19:21-22, KJV)

many years ago, they were grown up enough to commit themselves to Christ, and who knows that sufferings and the wrong turns they have been spared as they walked with Jesus. None of these things will be entirely clear till we reach heaven, yet one thing is clear even now: the point of the Christian's walk with Christ is that no matter how good we presently are, we will become even better if we let Christ choose the path and we follow faithfully in his steps.

Christ did so for Paul. He did not give riches to the man, but he made this world much richer through the man, and Paul regretting nothing, except that he had not found Christ earlier in life.

So, Paul had been the best of men. But also, he had been the worst of them, and in that, his case can be an encouragement for us.

Listen to the introduction to the story of Paul's conversion in Acts Chapter Nine. At this point, his name is Saul. The introduction goes thus:

¹And Saul, yet breathing out *threatenings and slaughter* against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, ²And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1-2, KJV)

Such ruthlessness! Already the man has "consented" to the death of poor Stephen. That was off in Jerusalem. But here he is hunting humans in Damascus. He is a fanatic. He is dangerous. He has permitted his unrelenting commitment to his faith drive him into slaughter. I believe that he has misunderstood the faith of Israel, for that faith is wide and complex and filled with goodwill and compassion. But whether Paul has been true to Israel's faith or not, nonetheless, he is a danger on earth. He is among the most ruthless of people. He is a cause of sorrow on a globe that already has too much cause of sorrow.

And Paul himself seems to have grieved deeply over his former manner of life. We can hear some of his grief in today's reading from Galatians 1:

¹³You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. (Galatians 1:13, RSV)

I do not think you have done any such thing. I do not think you have gone to the ends of the earth persecuting others. I do not think you have carried papers authorizing the arrest of people with whom you disagree. I do not think you have left wreck and ruin in your wake, fatherless and motherless children left sobbing because you have whisked away their parents.

But even if you have, the worst that you could claim is that you are like Paul, the "least of the apostles":

For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (1 Corinthians 15:9, KJV)

Be encouraged: the worst that can be said of you is that you have fallen into the company of Peter who denied his Lord and of Paul who persecuted the Church. But in falling into their company, you fall into the company of sinners who went on to become chief pillars of the church.

When the widow of Nain's son died, he was accompanied to heaven with great joy by the angels. But if Jesus had not raised up her son, she would not have been able to enjoy her son's new life.

But *this* new life - the life of conversion, Baptism, and Confirmation - this new life is one your mother can enjoy, whether she lives here below or yonder in heaven. If you permit yourself to be converted, your dear old mother and your dear old father will gain a new son, a new daughter.

Christ can make a righteous one of you, to the benefit of your neighbors and to the glory of his name, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.