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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, September 29, 2023
Matthew 9:14-26
The Last Laugh Belongs to Jesus

HOLY GOSPEL Matthew 9:14-26, RSV
In last week's reading, Jesus called an unlikely disciple: Matthew the tax collector. Now he answers a question about fasting, and he restores life to a child.

¹⁴Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁵And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. ¹⁶And no one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. ¹⁷Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; if it is, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved."

¹⁸While he was thus speaking to them, behold, a ruler came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." ¹⁹And Jesus rose and followed him, with his disciples. ²⁰And behold, a woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment; ²¹for she said to herself, "If I only touch his garment, I shall be made well." ²²Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. ²³And when Jesus came to the ruler's house, and saw the flute players, and the crowd making a tumult, ²⁴he said, "Depart; for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. ²⁵But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl arose. ²⁶And the report of this went through all that district.

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

What this father has said is really quite wonderful. It shows what the human spirit is capable of. His daughter has died. Surely he grieves for her. Yet he is able to fight through his grief, run to the One who can restore her life, and gives his great testimony:

"My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." (Matthew 9:18, RSV)

What an ocean of sorrow is contained in his first few words: “My daughter has just died.” He grieves, but not for long. When he comes to Jesus, he comes to the Bridegroom, who gives joy on earth. The man regains his daughter and then knows joy unspeakable and full of glory. Jesus is the difference. Jesus is the happy reason the disciples do not fast, and Jesus is the happy reason why this father can go home rejoicing, with his daughter again.

As I get older, I find myself wondering more and more: Where would we be if we did not have Jesus? This man’s daughter has died — the man in our Gospel story. Sons and daughters are not supposed to die before mother and father. It just does not seem right. But it happens, and even if it does not happen, too often we stand at the grave, sad at the passing of a loved one. It matters not whether that loved one is older or younger than us. Still, we grieve. If the person has really died, that is the end of the story. That is the end of the surprises that the person can bring to us. Now we must go on without our loved one. So, it *would have been* for this man in our Gospel story. It would have been that way for him if he did not have Jesus. Like humanity before him and after him, he would have to bury his daughter and move on in life as best he can. But he does have Jesus. He was born in the same generation as Jesus. He happens to be in the same town as Jesus. And so he has some hope in this world. He has hope that he would not have had otherwise:

“My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” (Matthew 9:18, RSV)

People laugh at Jesus when he says that the child is not dead, but asleep. “Do you not think we recognize death when we see it?” the people as good as say. “Look, she is not breathing. There is no flicker of movement in her eyes. Her body already is growing cold. Yet you say that she is not dead but sleeping!” And so they laugh. But this brings me to the title I have jotted down on this sermon: “The last laugh belongs to Jesus.”

I mean something more than that Jesus is vindicated before the people who laughed at him. Jesus does not laugh at them. They are simply human beings, living as best they can. No, the last laugh of Jesus is directed toward death itself! It is a glorious, triumphant laugh. It is directed against the devil who hurls death like a spear and who rejoices in the final breath of our brother and sister human beings. It is directed against the disobedience that brought death into this world, back when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit. The laugh of Jesus is directed against sin, whose wages are death. It is a deep, delighted laugh in the face of sin, death, and the devil, for they are going down. That is what the resurrection of Jesus means. When Jesus broke the never-before-broken bounds of death, he opened the way to a world rid of

those terrible forces. Easter means the death of death, sin, and the devil. And that is going to be a great sight to behold. Jesus is going to laugh with joy when our world is at least freed from this misery.

Isaiah of old spoke of this:

⁷And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. ⁸He will swallow up death for ever, and the LORD God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth; for the LORD has spoken. ⁹It will be said on that day, "Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation." (Isaiah 25:7-9, RSV)

Isaiah prophesied it, and Jesus is going to make it so! The man in the Gospel story had hope because of Jesus. So do we because of Him, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.