

**JOURNEY TO LIFE**  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
June 10, 2007  
Indiana-Kentucky Synod

Grace, Mercy and Peace be unto you from our Lord, Jesus, the Christ.

Every Sunday, in the 230 congregations of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod, the people of God gather to worship, learn and pray together. On this Sunday we also gather as a Synod in Assembly in Fort Wayne as 800 pastoral and lay leaders from all across the Synod worship, learn, pray and conduct the business of Synod together. We are reminded this day of what a synod is. It literally means “to go down the road together.” And what makes it possible to “go down the road together” is the unity that we share in Christ. This unity is a gift that God gives us in the Son, Jesus. We are brothers and sisters because of what God has done for us in Jesus. In his death and resurrection Christ has made us brothers and sisters.... who are on this journey together. Through our Baptism we are called to this journey that we share.

As we journey together we not only celebrate this gift of unity in Christ but we also look for ways to express that unity to the world. A few Sundays ago, on the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter we overheard Jesus praying for his disciples and for us that we all might be one in Him. Jesus prayed:

*“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”*

Then on Pentecost and Trinity Sundays we heard the promise that the Holy Spirit would be sent that we might be encouraged in our discipleship journey. The Spirit would give gifts for the journey by teaching and leading us.

This leading of the Spirit is crucial for us as we look to the future. The question we could ask is, “How do we know we are on the right road?” “Are we sure that we are following the right path?” “Or, are we being misled by the world and the agenda of the world?” These questions are crucial because one path can lead to life and another path can lead to death.

In today’s Gospel story we see the collision of two totally different journeys. One is a journey towards life... the other is a journey towards death and the grave. Jesus approaches the town of Nain with his disciples and a large crowd. They are a synod on the road together. As they traveled Jesus has brought life: proclaiming Good News to the poor and release to the captives, the recovery of the sight to the blind and the freeing of the oppressed. He has proclaimed the year of the Lord’s favor in their midst. In other words he has brought the Kingdom of God into their midst. He has brought Life.

They meet another group on a journey. They could also be called a synod. They are going down the road together in a funeral procession. Their destination is the grave. Their minds are on death. They are in pain and grief. Their bodies are bent and their steps are slow. Their songs are sad and they have trouble looking up and looking to tomorrow.

Jesus sees this procession and the reason for it. He sees the dead man being carried out of the city. However, his focus is not on the procession or even the dead man. His focus is on the widow who has lost her only son. She is in a destitute and serious situation. Without a husband or a son, she now has no status in that culture and no way to make a living. She cannot look to tomorrow for her future is uncertain.

The story tells us that Jesus' response to this woman is "compassion." Compassion is a word used in scripture to indicate that a person truly understands what another person is going through. Jesus saw things from this widow's perspective. He understood her plight and he was about to act in her best interest. He saw that she was caught in this march to death and was about to bring a halt to this journey.

So, Jesus said to her, "Do not weep." Then he walked over to the casket. The pallbearers stood still and Jesus said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" Immediately, the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.

Jesus stopped the procession. He ended the death march. And do you notice how he did it. It was not by avoiding death, but by touching it. He touched the casket. He did what was unthinkable in that culture. He touched what was unclean. Yet, Jesus is not defiled, but he removes the defilement.

Here Jesus confronts death so that we might know that death does not have the last word. He confronted the death march when he was tempted by the Devil to find another way to glory... a way that did not include the cross. He confronted the death march when he said in the garden, "Not my will, but yours be done." When taunted to come down from the cross, he confronted the death march by refusing to save himself. He suffered and died on the Cross for us. He confronted the death march in order to stop the death march in our lives.... in order to show us that death does not have the last word.

And he continues to battle the death march in our lives. He sees our pain and suffering. He understands our circumstances. He doesn't ask, "How did you get yourself in to this mess?" Rather, he simply says, "Do not weep." Then he stops the procession and says to us, "Rise!" "Your sins are forgiven!" "Go in peace! Serve the Lord" "Join me in this journey of life called the Kingdom of God!"

And what is true for us as individuals is also true for us as congregations and as a synod. Often, it feels as though we are on a death march. No matter how hard we try, things just do not get any better. We give and give and give of ourselves and nothing happens... nothing changes. It feels like we are in a downward spiral and the whole place is about to fall apart. We try everything, every program, every technique, but nothing seems to

work. Our bodies are bent over, our heads are down, our songs are sad and our words are sometimes ugly or non-existent. We have lost something very valuable to us. And we wonder what the future will bring.

When I visit congregations, I will often ask what their dreams are for the future of the congregation. I know a congregation is on a death march when they cannot articulate their dreams for the future. This is especially true when what they dream is that the church might get back to what it used to be.... that the pews and the classrooms might be full on Sunday mornings like they used to be. Or, I often hear that they wish that the young people would come back to church. Those are all signs of the death march at work in the church.

And the promise is that we don't have to stay on this journey to death. Jesus promises to come with the Kingdom of Life to stop this death march. And the way he does this in the church is quite amazing.

You will notice that in this Gospel story that what is restored is not just a life, but a relationship. He restores the relationship of a mother and her son. He gives them back to each other. This was truly Good News to a widow who had no social standing or means of support. It was the healing of a broken relationship and a broken heart. It was the freeing from death and grief those caught in its grasp. It was a proclamation that God had indeed looked in favor upon these people.

That's the promise we claim for the church this day. Jesus promises to restore our relationships... with the Father and with each other. In the waters of Baptism and by the power of the Spirit, we are given back to the Father, and we are also given back to the community.

This may have been why fear seized all of them when they saw what happened. Because if God is in the business of restoring relationships, then we are in trouble. No longer can I do what I want to do, but I have to do what God wants me to do. It has been so nice to run my life as I see fit. If my relationship with God is restored, that means I am no longer my own Lord and Shepherd.

But even worse, maybe I don't want to have my relationships with others restored. There are some people I just don't want to see again. And there are some folks that I never want to have to deal with in my life. Is this what it means to have relationships restored? It does not sound like good news to me that I might have to deal with certain people.

If I'm being called to walk with people I don't want to walk with, and if I'm being called to talk with people I don't want to talk with, and serve with people I don't want to serve with, then maybe the march of death is a better way to go. If embracing life means embracing all of God's children, just maybe it's not for me.

That's when Jesus looks at us with "compassion" and understands what we are going through and says, "Don't be upset, I'm about to do something new in your life!" For you

see, what God continues to do is send us Jesus. God gives Jesus back to us in Word, in Bread and in Wine. He continues to restore our relationships. And he says, “Your sins are forgiven. You are loved. Go in Peace. Serve the Lord”

And the miracle happens. We become what we eat. We eat the compassion of Christ in His Word and the Eucharist and we become his compassion for the world. We eat his body and drink his blood and we become his body in the world. And we find relationships being restored. We love those whom God loves. We reach out to those whom we never thought we could. That’s what happens when the Kingdom of Life breaks once again into our midst in Jesus.

In his Gospel the Evangelist Luke is making the point that Jesus is the One who makes a difference in our world. He has been preaching, teaching, healing, and driving out demons. He has just healed the Centurion’s slave and now has brought back to life the widow’s son. And he reports that the crowd glorified God and said, “A great prophet has risen among us.” And “God has looked favorably on his people!” and all because of this Jesus. Following our story in Luke 7 he reports that John the Baptist is asking of Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus responds by saying the proof is in the pudding.

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

We know he is the One because the Kingdom of Life is breaking out all around him. He makes a difference for the marginalized of the world.... those who are in pain and are suffering. And we will know that we are a part of his Kingdom work, a part of his journey to Life, when we see the same things happening in our midst.

Several months ago, I visited a congregation in our Synod that had come to life. It was evident that wonderful things were happening in their midst. The Spirit was active and the congregation and its ministries were growing. It was obvious to me that they had been moved by the compassion and Word of Jesus in their midst. They were experiencing restored relationships with God and others as they never had. One of the leaders said to me with joy in his heart, “We decided that we wanted to become known in this town as the church, that if you come to us with a need, you will not be turned away.”

These people know they are on the right road. No one has to tell them. It is the Spirit that leads them. It is Jesus who keeps coming to them to reveal his compassion and love for all. And it is his resurrected presence that gives new life and has the power to restore relationships. Let us trust the promise of Life that Christ brings and continue to journey down this road together.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Jim Stuck