

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
June 6, 2010
Luke 7:11-17

“A great prophet has risen among us!”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Our text for today from the Gospel of Luke is a miracle story. Jesus is going to the town of Nain and just as it always happened, a large crowd gathers around him, follows him, presses in on him. As he approaches the gate of the town, Jesus comes upon a funeral procession for a man who was a widow's only son. Not only was the widow grieving the loss of her beloved son but Jesus, and everyone present, knew that without a husband and now without a son, this woman's own life was at risk. It was the men in the family who made the money and provided for the women. The women—mothers and daughters—were the property of the men and without her husband AND her son, this widow would not only grieve but be unable to make a living, her own survival was at stake.

The Bible says that Jesus saw the widow and “had compassion for her and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’” Then Jesus approached the bier and said “Young man, I say to you, rise!” And the dead man sat up and began to speak.

Like the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, this story of the widow's son being brought back to life is one of the miracle stories in the Gospels. The son is dead—he is being carried to his place of burial and Jesus brings him back to life.

This passage in Luke is often lifted up as a story that demonstrates Jesus' miraculous powers, his deep sense of compassion, his well of love for those in need, *and this story foreshadows Jesus' own resurrection*. Preachers sometimes unpack the mystery of Jesus' divine powers and the hidden messages in the miracle stories. Those interpretations and analysis are all valuable. But that is not how the story has been speaking to me this week. Rather than focus on the famous line, “The dead man sat up and began to speak...” I find that I am more taken with the reaction of the crowd and what those who witnessed this miracle said in response. Jesus followers see this miraculous event and say, “A great prophet has risen among us.”

This week, as I have read and re-read this story, the response from the crowd has captured my imagination and I want to focus on that today. I think the reason is that my own faith does not hinge on the miracles that Jesus performed...did they happen? How did they happen? Are they to be taken literally or metaphorically? BUT my faith DOES hinge on the knowledge, the realization and the experience of Jesus as a great prophet who once walked among us. “A great prophet has risen among us!” This I know to be true. For a great prophet is someone who makes God’s presence, voice and intention clear. And certainly Jesus did just that. Jesus made God’s presence, voice and intention clear to the world.

This great prophet who rose from among us, this fine teacher, this deep thinker, this brave revolutionary, this tender friend changed the world. The way Jesus lived with compassion and courage, the common people he loved, the poor fishermen he called as his closest companions, the radical message he preached, the ways he stood up to the Roman Empire, and the decision to befriend those on the margins of power and wealth...this is the Jesus, the great prophet, who I know and love. My faith hinges on knowing THAT Jesus. A great prophet has risen among us.

I believe that Jesus the great prophet, great rabbi, great teacher and great friend left us with lessons about **life** that are as important—may be even more important—than the miracle stories about raising people from the dead. *One life lesson Jesus left to us is the difference between curing and healing.* We have been talking about this in our FIRST LIGHT Bible Study DVD series with theologians John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg.

The Bible says that Jesus **cured** illnesses—leprosy and other afflictions. And maybe he did. Maybe he touched people and their diseases disappeared. I am prepared to believe that. But the Bible also makes it clear that Jesus **healed** people, and as Crossan and Borg stress *curing is different from healing.* Curing means the disease goes away, the person is well again. Healing means the person is restored to a place in the community, welcomed to the family of God, not left alone, not abandoned, embraced by God and community and is at peace.

Jesus may have **cured** people...that is very powerful and may be true. I know Jesus **healed** people...and that is very powerful and I know that to be true. Jesus brought people into right relationship with God, in harmony with God, he welcomed people into the family of God, he connected people with community so they were no longer alone or ostracized, excluded or marginalized, ignored or

disregarded. Jesus was a healer. He made people whole on a fundamental, spiritual level. He made the invisible visible, he recognized those who were overlooked, he reached toward the edges of society and said, “You are child of God,” and he included the untouchables in his circle of love. Jesus was a healer.

And so for me this miracle story is less about the widow’s son being restored to life and more about the wisdom of the crowd that recognizes the radiant being in their midst and cries out: “A great prophet has risen among us!” How true. A great blessing, a gift, a role model, a teacher, a friend, a counselor, a companion, a healer, a great prophet has risen among us.

I fear that if my faith hinged on the fact that Jesus COULD cure those with grave afflictions and COULD raise people from the dead, I would be too agitated. I would get hot under the collar. I would be restless wondering why Jesus does not appear and cure the grave diseases among those I love and raise from the dead those I have lost.

What my faith hinges on is Jesus’ ability to heal and that I have witnessed, that I have experienced, that I know happened when Jesus walked the earth and I know it happens still today. Jesus’ healing powers are one of the cornerstones of my faith and one of the ways I see his work continue two millennia after his death.

I saw Jesus’ healing powers this week as our precious Ann Podolske, with multiple myeloma at age 50, learned that she had but a few days to live. I spent many hours at her side and talked with her about her passage from this life to the next. Ann spoke to me about her illness and her impending death, but mainly she spoke to me about her life and about her faith. And Ann has been talking to me about her life and her faith for the last few years. Ann’s story is not about being cured, it is about being healed.

Ann was very open about how she spent many years in church basements attending AA meetings. She talked with pride about getting sober and the friends and support she received in those powerful circles in many church basements. But for a long, long time Ann could not imagine coming upstairs, sitting in a pew and attending a church service in a sanctuary. She was too hurt by organized religion, too alienated from God, too wounded by the church. Ann thought the comfort, acceptance and good counsel she received in church BASEMENTS was enough. But when Ann and Linda’s beloved dog Linus died in 2007, Ann and her wife Linda were deeply shaken and saddened—and they felt a pull to at least try to

come to some church, to creep into the back pew of some sanctuary and hide and cry and pray.

And somehow God led Ann and Linda to this church, and somehow you cannot hide in the back pew of this church, and somehow they felt accepted and comfortable in this church, and somehow they came back, and back, and back again.

And the healing began. Ann was able to open up to the spirit of God and feel included in God's family again. Ann felt loved by a community of faith, by a group of spiritual sisters and brothers, and most importantly by God.

Ann and her beloved Linda experienced the extravagant welcome extended in this church as profoundly healing. YOU ALL became conduits, vessels, of God's love and Ann and Linda felt that love and something frozen in them melted, something deadened in them came alive, something stuck was released. Ann spoke to me about the healing she experienced here, with us, with God.

And when this winter after Linda died and Ann herself became sick with an aggressive form of cancer, she and I prayed together often. As Ann grew sicker and sicker, she did not feel abandoned by God, she felt closer and closer to God. Ann did not believe that Jesus would or could appear and cure her. But she did believe that Jesus would be close to her and that she would continue to be healed until she died.

And she was.

Ann's cancer was not cured, but her spirit was healed. This week, when told that she had days left to live, Ann faced her death with serenity—she felt held and rocked in the arms of a loving God. This week, in her final days, Ann was radiant, happy and peaceful. She died yesterday, unafraid.

I do not know if when he lived in ancient times Jesus was able to restore life to those who had died. But I do know that Jesus is able to give *new* life to those who are living—those who are living with grave diseases, those whose final days are numbered, those who are saying good-bye to family and friends.

I do not know if when he lived in ancient times Jesus was able to restore life to those who had died. But I do know that Jesus brings *new* life to those who sit in circles in church basements and decide to start their lives over, and those who sit in pews in sanctuaries looking for help and hope.

I know that Jesus gives *new* life to those who are addicted and lost, those who have been betrayed and abandoned, those who have been hurt and retreated.

I know that Jesus gives *new* life to those who are living with pain and suffering, loneliness and despair, anxiety and fear.

I know Jesus brings *new* life to those in crisis, those in trouble, those in danger, those in prison.

I know that Jesus brings *new* life to those who cry out, those who seek, those who long, those who wonder, those who mourn and those who pray.

I know that Jesus brings *new* life to those who have run out of hope and those who have run out of time.

Maybe when you read Luke 7:11-17 the line that jumps out at you is:
“And Jesus said, ‘Young man, I say to you, rise!’”

Maybe the line that jumps out at you is:
“The dead man sat up and began to speak.”

Maybe the miracle of Jesus’ bringing a dead son back to life stirs deeply in your soul and nourishes you. Bless you.

For me the miracle of this story is captured in these simple words:
“A great prophet has risen among us!”

For me that great prophet brings *new life* not just to the dead but to the living... that great prophet brings *healing* to those who are wounded.

Even as she lay dying this week, I saw new life in our sister Ann. She was calm and funny, peaceful and happy, composed and serene as she faced death.

Jesus brings new life....even to those who are dying.

A great prophet has risen among us.
Thanks be to God.

Amen.