

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, February 16, 2025

Would you join me in a word of prayer?

Gracious Spirit, you are as close to us as our next breath, so come in this time to comfort and call us forth. Come in this time with your peace and with your wisdom. Give us ears to hear your word this day, for we ask it in the name of the Living Word, Jesus Christ. Amen.

So this morning we continue in our sermon series entitled Jesus Heals. This is a series that's going to take us through the month of February. If you haven't been with us, we encourage you to go back and check out our YouTube channel or the podcast, where you can hear the sermons from the last couple weeks. Like, share, and subscribe as the kids say, and you can share those with friends as well. We are moving through this series because we believe that there are things for us to learn from the healing stories of Jesus, particularly in the Gospel of Luke. We worship a God who heals. Amen. We'll try one more time—we worship a God who heals. Amen.

Amen. Very good. Luke wants us to pay particular attention to this God who heals in the person of Jesus Christ. And so I told you last week, just to preview a bit of this week, that Luke likes to tell these stories of healing in pairs, but for the purpose of our series we divided up the text, the Narrative Lectionary text. So last week we heard a story of the healing of the Centurion's Servant. This morning we hear the story of the Widow of Nain and the raising of her son from the dead. If we were to hear these stories together, they would teach us the different ways in which Jesus interacts with people in his ministry, okay. So in the Centurion we have a person in many ways of worldly status and power, okay. When we see the way, if we read a little bit earlier in chapter 7:1-10 together, we see the way in which Jesus responds to and interacts with a centurion, and then this morning in just a moment we will see the way in which Jesus interacts with one who is very vulnerable, right, perhaps as vulnerable as a person can be in the context of our scripture. Jeanene did a good job of outlining for our children that this was a woman who had lost her spouse and now is grieving the death of her son, which would have been her last lifeline, if you will. So we'll read together from Luke 7, starting in the 11th verse moving through the 17th verse. Let us listen together for God's word to each of us and to God's church this day.

A little later Jesus went to a city called Nain. His disciples and a great crowd traveled with him. As he approached the city gate, a dead man was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow. A large crowd from the city was with her. When he saw her, the Lord had compassion for her and said, "Don't cry." He stepped forward and touched the stretcher on which the dead man was being carried. Those carrying him stood still. Jesus said, "Young man, I say to you, get up." The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Awestruck, everyone praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help God's people." This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding region.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

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So Jesus does what a lot of us do when we see a funeral procession going by. What do we do when we're driving down a road here in Memphis and a funeral procession goes by? We pull over to the side of the road, right? Or unless you're the guy behind me on Central Avenue this past week when a funeral procession was coming by. I pulled over to the side of the road and he did for just a moment, and then he sped around me. Couldn't wait too long for the funeral procession. There's something that happens—perhaps it's just in the South. I'm not sure. That's mostly where I've lived, but when a funeral procession is going by people draw themselves to the side of the road, and we wait; and we wait in honor...to honor those who are passing along. We do all sorts of different things at that moment. Sometimes when a procession is passing by, it takes me to a place of when I've been in one of those processions, right, either as a friend toward the back of the line with my lights flashing or in the front, right, perhaps in some car driven by someone who works for a funeral home. Sometimes I go back to that sort of moment. Sometimes I try to imagine who's in the line, what their story was, who's grieving them, what the days and weeks ahead might hold for those who are following in the procession. Well, Jesus pulls up on a funeral procession as he makes his way into the city of Nain, and he does what most of us do. He pauses to watch it go by. Now each story of healing, each story in scripture really, is a lesson for us. If we truly believe that our lives as Christians are to become clearer and clearer reflections of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, then each story—particularly this month those healing stories—has something to teach us about how our lives are to be shaped and reshaped, how our pattern of moving through the world should be shaped more and more in alignment with the pattern of Jesus. So here's the pattern for him. He is not only over to the side of the road, but he is paying attention to those who are walking by. He sees one carrying the grief differently than others in the procession. She is crying. Jesus hasn't met her. He doesn't know this woman, right; but her position in the procession and the way in which she is carrying her grief, it lets him know who she is, and Jesus in this moment is attentive. That's the pattern. He is attentive to the grief that this woman is carrying, but he's not just attentive. The text goes further. The text says when Jesus saw her, he had compassion for her. So the pattern is at least twofold. The pattern of Jesus when he comes upon grief is to be attentive to it and have compassion upon the one who carries it. And so if we believe that indeed our lives are to become clear and clearer reflections of the life of Jesus, then we have much to learn from his attentiveness and his compassion.

We learned last week as we reflected on, wrestled with, the healing of the servant of the centurion, and we understood Jesus's power to heal as both a comfort to us and a call upon us. I had a preaching Professor tell me a long time ago, “If it's worth preaching once, it's worth preaching twice.” So we're going to repeat the pattern this day. This healing story is both a comfort and a call. Today the scripture is both the reassurance of the good news to us that is a

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comfort and...and it is a call, perhaps even to some good trouble. Let's talk about how. It is a comfort, this text is...this scripture...this story, it is a comfort because it means that you, when you are most vulnerable, Jesus is attentive to you. And not only is he attentive to you, he has compassion for you. When you are carrying with you your deepest grief and fear, like that woman was so many years ago, it is in that time when you feel most exposed to the world because you are truly exposed to the world. When you are carrying your deep grief and fear, it is in that time when you are seen by your Savior. This is the difficult part of the lesson this day. It is in the moment when we...when all seems lost that the healing power of God becomes manifest more often than not in scripture. It's a pattern, another pattern that is, because it's not just true here in this text in Luke, it's true over and over in the biblical story. The life and ministry of Jesus reveals this pattern of God's power manifesting in the moments that feel the most lost. We see it in John 11 when Lazarus is dead and gone, a stone rolled over his tomb. The people had come earlier to Jesus, asked him to come and help. He had said Lazarus is just sick, but now when he comes, he is dead. They have already processed his body and put it into the tomb. And then Jesus tells them to roll away the stone. And do y'all remember the command that he gives to the dead man in that tomb? "Come out," and Lazarus does. In the moment of loss, in the moment of deepest grief, Jesus speaks a word and the dead rise. Not only do we see it in the Gospel of John, we see it in the Gospel of Mark. Perhaps you remember the story of Jairus's daughter, this one who has taken ill and died as well, or has taken ill, excuse me. Jesus makes his way into that room, and he says to the little girl "Talitha koum," which means "Little girl, get up," and she does. From the bed of sickness, she rises. And we don't just see it in Jesus doing it to others, we see it in the pattern of the Cross as well. We see it in Jesus on the cross, when the curtain is ripped, when darkness falls across the world and all hope seems lost, and there is this pregnant pause of three days, and then the tomb is empty. In the resurrection of our Savior, the same Lord who looks with compassion and attentiveness to the grief and pain of this woman this morning, we see also this pattern that when all seems lost that is when the healing power of God becomes manifest. And seeing this pattern, the church says together—"Amen." Nah. We don't. It's a lukewarm amen at best, no pun intended. It's because we don't like this pattern. I don't like this pattern. It's not how we would draw up the pattern if we were the one in charge of the healing. Can't God show up earlier? The friends of Lazarus try to get him to, and he doesn't. Can't God show up? Can't Jesus show up before we're on our deathbed, or before we're being carried through the streets after we have passed away? I don't claim to understand it, but it is the pattern. Not the one I would write or that you would author. And so, then, if we see a pattern that we don't understand, we have to begin to use our holy imaginations. Why is it that this pattern seems to repeat itself over and over and over again? I wonder, might this pattern viewed over the long arc of God's history, might it cultivate something within us? Might it, Beloved, cultivate

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hope—hope in God showing up in the times that feel the most vulnerable, the most grievous because they are.

When people who are paying attention would rightly say all hope is lost. Perhaps the comfort of this pattern is meant to ground us in the belief that Jesus's ultimate healing power will come, and until that time we must not lose hope.

If it's a comfort, it's also a call. And it's a call, this healing power of Jesus is a call, because if we desire our lives to reflect that of Jesus, we must minister and move through the world as Jesus did. We must learn from how he lived. That's why we're here, spoiler. It is to become clearer and clearer reflections of Jesus, which means that when we see the most vulnerable, we are called to both attentiveness and compassion. It means when we pull up on the funeral processions of the world, both literal, both literal on the streets of Memphis, but also in ways that we can see clearly as funeral processions even when they look a little different, we are called to not look away, to fix our eyes on the ones carrying the grief, to have compassion upon them. But in our society, Preacher, how will we know? How will we know who it is we are to be attentive to and have compassion upon? Perhaps we take a hint from Jesus, and we pay attention to the one who is weeping, not to gain attention from the crowd but from a place of deep grief and fear. That is what the Widow carried with her that day. It wasn't simply the grief of her son's passing, though it was that. It was also the fear of what his passing meant for her life, what her life was quite literally going to look like in the days and weeks and months ahead. She was afraid, and rightly so. She was the most vulnerable in her community.

When I begin to pay attention to those who are weeping, when I pay attention to those in my circle who I see in deep grief and fear, I see my friends who immigrated here. I see my friends in deep grief who are LGBTQ. I see my friends who are parents of trans kids. They carry deep grief and fear in this moment. They are not the only ones, but they are the ones in my circle who I see closer to the front of the processional carrying a heaviness; and not just them but also those who care for them, who care for the most vulnerable in our society, who care for the refugee. This week I went down to the the Cupboard. Y'all go to the Cupboard? If you're on a health kick, don't go to the Cupboard, okay. I ordered green stuff and there was a lot of butter in all the green stuff, okay. I sat across the table from some folks who work for World Relief, who have dedicated their lives to caring for refugees in our community. Y'all might be familiar with World Relief, kind ofand their ministry across the world. What you might not know is they are the organization entrusted in our community to help settle refugees here. They're the only organization that does it in this part of Tennessee, and so we...we have a ministry here called No Longer Strangers Ministry. We have a good neighbors team. I see members of our good

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neighbors team out in the congregation this morning, and we partner with World Relief. And we, over the last several years, we've welcomed, we've helped do the ministry of welcoming refugees in the community. I sat across the table from them, and I ate my spinach and my greens and too many cornbread rolls, and I heard them talk—about how their funding had been drastically cut, and just sat there pastorally and listened to the them imagine and help us imagine how they were going to do the work of the ministry of Jesus Christ, of welcoming and helping the refugee feel safe in this place. I actually heard a word of hope, which I didn't expect. One of the leaders of the organization said “We are taking this moment, although we do not want it, we are taking this moment, and we are turning it. What we've realized is that our responsibility now is to help the church do the work of welcoming the stranger. We had resources, and we would do a lot of that work, but we're going to have to double down. We need the church to show up to do this work for us, and so we are going to pastor, and we're going to minister, and we're going to try to encourage churches in our community to do that. The weight of the moment on them is heavy, and yet it seemed to me that they were cultivating a sort of hope that can endure the deepest, most grievous time. And they weren't just cultivating it for themselves, they were calling us to it as well. Michael Peeler, former Elder, works with the No Longer Strangers Ministry, was across the table from me as well. We kept locking eyes with each other, imagining together what does the next season of that sort of ministry look like. If you're a member of our Good Neighbors Team, would you raise your hand? Okay, we have the, we have a couple right here. Some of y'all are visiting, right. The Rhodes family will, they will, they will greet you this day. They'll talk to you about what that means, what it looks like. It's not just about the refugee. There are many others...many others who carry grief this day. What we know from this text is that the God that we know in Christ Jesus is one who is attentive to the grief and the fear of the world, and that he's not only attentive to it, he has compassion on it. And for him, what that means is that he reaches out his hand over a stretcher making its way down a dusty road in a small town, and he tells the one laid upon it to get up; and mysterious as it might be, he does. And he tends to him and then he hands him, the text says, to his mother. And I wonder what the Body of Christ that is Idlewild Presbyterian Church might look like if we extended our hand over that same stretcher, and we imagined together what it might mean to collectively say to those who feel forgotten, feel neglected, those who grieve and are in fear this day, “We're here. Get up.” The promise of our faith is that we worship a God who is attentive to us in our deepest grief and fear. That ought to comfort us this day whatever you carried here, but in that comfort there is a calling that we might go and do the same because we worship a God who heals. Amen.

Let us pray,

Gracious and loving God, you meet us in our deepest grief and fear. You meet all your people in that place. It's an uncomfortable place for us to be walking in those processions or even watching

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them go by. We do not want to be there. We wish there was another way, and yet we find ourselves there. And so would you give us the courage this day to extend our hand to offer a word of consolation to those who grieve, but also to not let it end there, to move your healing into the world by our work? Would you have us trust in you ever more to be the spirit of healing in the world this day? Would you give us the hope to sustain us as we go about this life of faith together? Would you help us to know that over and over and over your pattern is one that meets us in the places that seem lost and offers us healing and new life? So may it be so in your church and in your world this day, for we ask it in the name of the one who died and rose again, Jesus Christ. Amen.