



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Looking for Jesus”

1 Kings 17:17-24, Luke 7:11-17
Will Sparks June 9, 2013

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I once heard the story of a large church with a couple of ministers, and these particular two ministers were not getting along. And it got worse and worse until they weren't even speaking to each other.

As I said this was a large church with several services on a given Sunday. So one Wednesday it happened that both these two ministers both called the office and gave the secretary their respective sermon titles to be put on the church street sign. The secretary, knowing the conflict between them looked at the two titles and just decided to go with it. So on the sign in front of the church passers by could read: morning worship, 10am “Jesus walks on water.” Evening worship, 7pm, “Looking for Jesus.”

Fortunately people diving by the church would be more likely to get a chuckle than to be confused by such a sign. Unlike the person who drove by the sign on the lawn in their neighborhood which read, "Need Help? Call Jesus! 1-800-005-3787" Well curiosity got the better of him and he called, and a voice with a latin american accent came on the line, "Jesus lawn and garden. This is Jesus- how can I help you?"

There is a van that habitually parks near my house and in the window there is a sign, "Jesus saves," and I can't help but wonder what the owners of the car are offering. Which Jesus are they offering and what kind of help are you going to get from him? What kind of Jesus are you looking for and if he saves you, what does he save you from?

I know what the common perception of the "Christian" answer to that question is: that Jesus is the only way God has of saving us from hellfire and damnation; that, by confessing our faith in Jesus as our personal Lord and Saviour we open the door to God's grace and go from death to eternal life, but as my preaching mentor Bob Smith once said, "as far as I am concerned that is just jargon, theological gobbledegook, ecclesiastical mumbo jumbo."

I am always suspicious of people who put conditions on love, who say, "if you are quiet and well-behaved, or if you wait on me slavishly and obey me, or if you flatter me from dawn to dusk, or if you jump through some spiritual hoop I will save you, or heal you, or make you prosperous, or make you happy." I think God's love is bigger than that, better than that. I think "Jesus saves" must mean more than that. I am not looking for that kind of Jesus, and if I found him, I'm not sure we'd be friends.

I am pretty sure that if you talked to the widow of Nain that day when Jesus came through town, she would be able to tell you very specifically what he saved her from. Not that our social safety nets are in great shape these days, but in Jesus' day there was no such thing as a social safety net. And if you were a woman, the only safety net available to you was the man in your life, be it your husband, your son or your father. They were the keeper of the households, and as you grew up and were married you moved from the safety of your father's house to the safety of your husband's house. And if then your husband died, if you had a male child, the household would be held together within the family, and you would remain safely within the household of your son. However, if, like happened to the widow of Nain, life conspired to take

both your husband and your only son from you, the household would revert to your husband's family and you would be at the mercy of them. They could take you in, or they could cut you loose. Being a burden on the household of your in-laws was a vulnerability nobody wanted to have to face. Being saved from such a fate was being saved from real, tangible misery. When she proclaimed Jesus saves, this was no ecclesiastical mumbo jumbo. This was being saved from a destitute life.

But many in the Christian faith and in Christian theology have spiritualized Jesus and the way in which he saves. He is the only way God has of making us spiritually whole, regardless of whether we are whole in body, or whether we have enough to eat, or have a home to live in. What really matters is the state of our soul. That's Jesus' domain. If you are looking for Jesus, look in the spiritual realm. Those are the roads he travels.

And I don't doubt he does. I used to do a lot of 5th steps for people in the 12 step AA programs, so I have heard many stories of people whose lives have become unmanageable, who ended up in a cycle of addiction that was destroying everything they had on every level you can think of. Financial, Job, family, marriage, friendships. The whole thing was falling apart because of an addiction. And the tendency when you are in the grip of an addiction is to think that you can solve this yourself- "I'll get another job. My wife didn't understand me. My kids will come around. That friend was being a jerk anyways...." And the person with an addiction tries to control the effects it has on life, minimize the losses, until at some point, the losses are inescapable. That is when the spiritual nature of the struggle becomes really clear. I am not the author of my own life, and I can't control it. Drink or drugs will not fill the hole in my soul. That is a spiritual problem with very practical implications.

The Jesus I am looking for is the one who met the widow of Nain in the midst of her very real and very practical distress with revival- new life. The Jesus I am looking for cares for the practical struggles of our lives. The reason the crowds began to crush in on him was that he offered real tangible revival and new life. He offered a gospel that fed the belly as well as the soul. He offered a gospel of love in which real outcasts who loved real lonely lives on the edges of the community who experienced real prejudice were given a place at real tables with real food on them. And that real practical salvation, offered real new life, and made a massive spiritual difference in people's lives.

The late Shel Silverstein wrote a poem called "The Little Boy and the Old Man" in which a child confesses that he sometimes drops his spoon, wets his pants and cries. The old man hears that confession and admits that he too has these problems sometimes. The little boy confides that worst of all is the pain he feels when grownups don't pay attention to him. His companion reaches out and the boy feels the warmth of a "wrinkled old hand," and the old man says to the boy, "I know what you mean." Nothing more than that. And nothing here about condition, or obligation, no "shoulds" or "oughts" or "shouldn'ts." Just the touch of one life with another life in which life, real, practical, lived, is exchanged.

Looking for Jesus? As we open to another with honesty, practically, sharing real life, broken, messy, beautiful and vulnerable, amazingly he finds us. We are found. Amen.