

Crossing Lines

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Luke 7:11-17

Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

To begin this morning, I'd like to make three cultural observations, and then see what this ancient, living text can teach us about them.

When I was in my final year of theological school, I was participating in what is called Clinical Pastoral Education, where I worked as a chaplain and took classes in a hospital. One of the requirements of this class was that we take a class tour of a funeral home, including the parts of the funeral home that are usually off-limits to the general public.

It wasn't as bad as it sounds. In fact, it was a remarkably, clean, sterile, tidy, organized environment, much more so than the house in which I, a graduate student, was currently living. Let's face it: funeral homes in the United States are more sterile than many hospitals in the Third World.

As you might expect, I've spent a good deal of time in funeral homes, or funeral parlors as they used to be called. My experience in these places predates my church work; my parents took me to many, many, funerals during my childhood and youth. I do not come from a particularly big family, just one who sprang from the same rural community in eastern Virginia, so I was blessed with knowing second and third cousins, great aunts and uncles, and when they died, we went. Throughout the years, my experiences were always the same: mourning was done in a way that was always sterile, orderly, and neat, surrounded by lilies, roses, and occasionally, birds of paradise.

The second observation I would like to make is this: how the lives, roles, and positions of women in society have changed, even in my lifetime. I'm not saying we have achieved full equality, but women have careers and positions in society today of which the suffragists dreamed. When Ellen was about four, she told me in a very matter-of-fact tone, "Daddy, girls cannot be doctors." The result of this statement was a much longer lecture than Ellen would ever

want, but one of which Gloria Steinem and Susan B. Anthony would have been proud. She said the same thing once about women being pastors, and she got the same lecture. We used the last presidential election cycle as a teachable moment, when it looked at one point like either the next President or Vice-President would be a woman.

The third observation I would like to make goes back to death. I feel that sometimes, as a result of Western secular universalism, we take life after death for granted. To this day, more Americans believe that death is not the end than do not. We typically believe that you die, and if you are good, you go to heaven. It isn't Christian orthodoxy by any stretch of the imagination, but there you have it.

Now, for this morning's text: it begins with the words "Soon afterwards." These words refer to a miraculous healing Jesus has just performed for the slave of one of Herod's centurions, something Jesus does at a distance because the slave is in the centurion's home, and the centurion, knowing he is an outsider, does not feel worthy of having Jesus "under his roof." Jesus is amazed at his faith, and upon returning to the man's home, these Gentile outsiders find the slave to be healed.

Immediately thereafter, in this morning's text, Jesus and the crowd following him happen upon a funeral procession. A man who had died being is carried out of the town. His mother was a widow, and he was her only son. In the time of this text, widows were among the most vulnerable people in society. The Israel's prophets describe the nation's treatment of widows being a measure of the nation's holiness.¹ This son who had died would have been this widow's sole means of financial support; she would not have had access to social agencies like you and I have today. In fact, what property she did have would often have been returned to her husband's family, leaving her dependent upon the goodwill of the community for her survival.²

What is striking in this story is how the interaction between Jesus and the widow begins. Unlike many of Jesus' stories of healing, where the sick approach Jesus, pushing through the crowd, calling out for him, cutting a hole in the roof of a house to be lowered to him, or reaching out to touch his cloak, Jesus sees this woman's pain and anguish, and he approaches *her*. He feels compassion for her, and the word Luke uses for compassion is a word that we might translate as gut-wrenching, a word used when the Good Samaritan sees the crime victim in the road, or when the father of the Prodigal sees his son alive and returning to the farm.³ In this text, Jesus is overwhelmed with compassion, and he acts on behalf of this woman, who was one of the most socially and economically disadvantaged people of the nation, and in doing so, demonstrates

¹ Steven J. Kraftchick in *Feasting On the Word, Year C, Volume 3*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2010, p. 119.

² Verlee A. Copeland in *Feasting On the Word, Year C, Volume 3*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2010, p. 119.

³ Gregory Anderson Love in *Feasting On the Word, Year C, Volume 3*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2010, p. 119.

how God's love and provision extend to all of God's people. In what he does next, he is willing to risk rebuke, even scorn, to extend God's mercy to the most vulnerable in society.⁴

So, Jesus acts. He approaches the dead man and he touches the bier, which is the movable frame on which a body, coffin, or casket is carried to a grave. In doing so, Jesus has crossed a line. You and I regard Jesus' touching of the dead as compassionate, even something we ourselves have done in the sterile environment of a funeral home. Yet, for a male Jew to have touched the bier would have been considered unclean. Luke tells us that those carrying the man stopped when Jesus did this, and they likely did so out of shock, if not disgust.

Finally, Jesus, in telling this man to rise, Jesus is claiming authority over death. Within the parties that comprised ancient Judaism, there was no consensus on whether the resurrection of the dead was possible, and these were people who had not seen the empty tomb, and who did not have Easter Sunday as a part of their faith. Yet in this text, we receive the hope and promise that, despite our fears that death always gets the last word, when death arrives, Jesus shows up as well, and that this is a foreshadowing of the one who would conquer death, not just for Jarius' daughter, not just for this widow's son, not just for himself, but for you, and for me.

He defends the widow. He touches the bier. He overcomes death. In this morning's text, as he does throughout his ministry, Jesus is crossing lines. Even when it is risky, even when it is unpopular, even when it requires him to challenge and cross the very teachings, the very boundaries, and the very lines he had been taught since childhood, Jesus finds and crosses the cultural, political, and religious lines of his day.

Where are our lines? What are the lines that we dare not cross, for fear of rebuke, for fear of challenging the assumptions under which we were raised, or for fear of being pushed out of safe and comfortable places? Sometimes we are told where the lines are by people we love. Sometimes our society or culture determines where the lines are. Sometimes the church has drawn the lines, if only in a vain attempt to keep things as they are. Sometimes you and I draw the lines ourselves.

Where are our lines? What do we too readily accept? What is untouchable to us. What broken social systems function in our midst that we hesitate to cross for the sake of the gospel? What lines exist too easily in our own hearts, mine and yours? Is it race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, education, age, politics, or class? You see, all of the lines that Jesus crossed were well-established lines. They served to help define who these people were. They were accepted because they had become a part of everyday life. They made sense. They were often even defensible by holy scripture. There were people who it was acceptable to have living in poverty. There were people who it was acceptable not to associate with, or not to touch. In Jesus' day it was women, Gentiles, Samaritans, lepers, the demon possessed, the tax collectors, prostitutes, adulterers, and the dead.

Where are our lines? Who have we been taught it is acceptable to not accept?

⁴ Copeland, 119.

I believe that in the Great Commission, when Jesus sent *all* his disciples “into *all* the world, baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching all he had commanded us,” that Jesus sent us to cross lines. Jesus sends you and me and all who believe in his name as one who understands both the risks and rewards of crossing lines. Jesus sends us to cross lines as one who knows what it is like to leave places of comfort to go to the places and neighborhoods and countries where he would be the outsider. Jesus sends us to cross lines as one who knows that when we are moved by divine compassion as he was, that there are no lines we will not cross in order to be in the places and with the people with whom God dwells. Jesus sends us to cross lines as one who proclaims that when we dare to cross lines, that he is with us, even to the end of the world.

And Jesus sends us to cross lines as the one who crossed the line between heaven and earth for you, and for me, so that we too may be the people who cross the lines from life, to death, to life everlasting, in his name.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.