

“The Ultimate Tragedy” (Luke 7:11-17) Pentecost 2, June 6, 2010

Some people have no sense of humor. My doctor in Torrance was one of them, which sometimes I would forget. Like the time he told me I needed to start watching my cholesterol. “Now, tell me again what religion you are?” “Lutheran,” I answered. “Good,” he said. “Then have a glass of red wine every night. That will help lower your cholesterol.” I was happy to follow *those* orders, but then he started telling me a bunch of other things I should do: cut back on red meat, cut back on fatty foods – you know the drill. So to lighten things up, I said, “Okay, doc. But just so you know, I’m not going to be a fanatic about this.” “Why not?” he asked. “Well,” I said, “think of it from a pastor’s point of view. Why would I deny myself all this good stuff just to delay going to heaven?” You should have seen the look on his face! Blank stare! I had to explain, “It was a joke.”

Now, truth be told, I *haven’t* been a fanatic about my diet – as you can tell! So that part *wasn’t* a joke. And actually, the part about delaying going to heaven – that was only partly a joke. For again, think about it. Holding on to this life as long as we possibly can should *not* be what matters most. Yes, this life is a blessing. God has entrusted us with bodies and souls, family and friends; time, talent, and treasure. God has entrusted us with all that we have, and we are to make the most of it – to His glory. But as we do, we also need to keep things in perspective. *This* life is not our final destination. Compared to eternity, *this* life is just a blip. So to treat this life as if nothing else matters, to act as if this life is all we’re going to get – that’s nuts! And yet, some people do that. Even some Christians do that. They focus on this life alone; think about this life alone; cling to this life alone. In fact, if you were to ask these people what they consider the ultimate tragedy, they would answer in terms of this life alone. “*Dying*,” they would say, “*or dying too soon. That is the ultimate tragedy.*”

But my friends, as common as that attitude may be, nothing could be further from the truth! Dying is not the ultimate tragedy. It is simply a fact of life. A hard, bitter fact of life, but one that, sooner or later, happens to all of us. It can happen suddenly or slowly, justly or unjustly, earlier than we want or later, but dying is a fact of life that we need to expect and be prepared for. And prepared – not because it’s “the end,” by the way. Properly understood, dying is not the end of life. It is simply the moment of transition between this life and the life to come. After traveling however many years through time, we arrive at the threshold of eternity, and dying is how we cross over – how we go on to our final destination. As for what our destination will be – well, that all depends, doesn’t it? Not on our works. No one can work their way to heaven. It depends on grace – on us receiving and trusting God’s gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. *With* Christ, we can count on an eternity of perfect love and joy. *Without* Christ, we can count on just the opposite. So this question about the ultimate tragedy – we’re not just nit-picking here. This is no joke! We’re talking about where we will spend eternity! And we need to be very clear on this. The ultimate tragedy is not dying or even dying too soon. **The ultimate tragedy is dying without Christ.**

To see this more clearly, let's reflect a bit on the miracle described in today's Gospel. It begins with a funeral procession heading toward the graveyard. On the funeral bier, we see a man who has died much too young. Walking behind him, we see his mother – and what bitter tears she weeps! No grief even comes close to that of a mother losing a child. And as if that were not bad enough, this woman is a widow – we call her the widow of Nain – and this young man was her only child, her only hope of support in her old age. So what a tragedy this is! But now, in what seems her darkest hour, who comes up to her but Jesus? He tells her, **“Do not weep.”** And before she can even respond, Jesus does the unimaginable. He says, **“Young man, I tell you: rise!”** And the young man does rise! Right then and there! Jesus has brought him from death to life!

Now, any other grieving parent might see this and think: *Look! After the ultimate tragedy, Jesus performed the ultimate miracle. If only we could count on that!* But I wonder if that is what the Widow of Nain would think. Yes, as she first embraces her son, she feels deliriously happy! And as they head home, what gratitude wells up inside! But later that night, as she lies in bed thinking about the tragedy and the miracle, I wonder if darker thoughts don't also creep into her mind – like the awful realization: *This miracle is only temporary. I could lose my son again. A year from now, a week from now, a day, an hour, a second from now, I could lose my son again. This miracle is only temporary.*

And that's true, isn't it? It's true of all miracles. They're only temporary. Did the people Jesus fed with fish and loaves never get hungry again? Did the sick people Jesus healed stay healthy forever after? Did the dead people Jesus raised avoid dying altogether? No! These miracles were temporary. And miracles were never meant to be anything more than temporary. There is a reason why the Gospel of John calls them signs. Miracles are not ends in themselves but signs pointing beyond themselves to Jesus. They give us a glimpse of who Jesus is and how much He can do. What's more, they give us a glimpse of what life *will* be like when we finally reach His kingdom. Then and there, **we “will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike” us, “nor any scorching heat. The Lamb” of God will be our “shepherd, and He will guide” us “to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from” our “eyes.”** The life to come *will* be great! In fact, **“eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor can mortal mind imagine what great things God has prepared for those who love Him.”** But that is not *this* life. *This* life is a whole different ball game. In *this* life, miracles are only temporary.

And as the Widow of Nain lies in her bed, mulling things over, I wonder what she thinks about this fact? As an adult, she knows this world is a dangerous place. One tragedy has been averted, but others could lie ahead. And as a mother, she wants to protect her son; wants him to live happily ever after. But how is that possible? As a pious Jew, she believes there will be a *“resurrection of the righteous.”* But as one who is honest with herself, she knows neither she nor her son can claim to be righteous. So where does this leave her? Where does this

leave him? What hope do they have for the future? Once again, bitter tears roll down her cheeks – even on this day of rejoicing. For as sad as it was to lose her son once, it's even sadder to think of losing him again. And saddest of all is the thought of losing him forever. That would be the ultimate tragedy!

Unless... Unless... And you know what I'm about to say, don't you? There is a way to avoid the ultimate tragedy. It's trusting in Him who *is* "**the way...and the truth, and the life.**" It's trusting in Jesus as your Savior. So did the widow and her son do that? History doesn't say, but having received so much from Jesus, one can only hope that they would want to learn more about Him. And as they learn more about Him, one can only hope that they would hear the good news! And as they hear the good news, one can only hope that they would receive the Lord's ultimate gift – the forgiveness of their sins, the offer of salvation, an eternity of peace and perfect joy, all theirs by grace alone. Yes, one can only hope! Just as one can only hope that people today would receive this ultimate gift – also by trusting in Jesus.

For let's face facts. This world will always be a dangerous place. That is the downside of us human beings having a will of our own and living in a place where we can exercise it freely. God could have made us robots, I suppose, or put us in a place where we could only act as robots. Then the world would be squeaky clean. But God created us to be human – the sense of "*humane*." His goal was for us to reflect His own goodness, and for that, we had to be free to make good choices. Unfortunately, that meant we'd also be free to make bad choices – which we did and continue to do. That is why this world is such a dangerous place. In fact, thanks to our human selfishness, that is why this world will *always* be a dangerous place. There's no magical way to fix it as long as we have wills of our own and the freedom to use them.

Now, that's not to say we should just give up on this world. To the contrary! It's all the *more* reason to choose love, choose goodness, choose responsibility, choose faith. This world is still God's world, and so long as we travel through it, we are to care for it – and for each other – to the glory of God. But by the same token, we need to do this without illusions – especially ones about what God really should do if He really does love us! Even more, we need to do it without self-pity, without self-importance, and without acting as if this life is all that matters. For it's not. This life is just a journey. We can enjoy the journey, make the most of it, but we must not lose sight our final destination – or how to be sure of getting there. For whatever tragedies we face in this life, that would be the ultimate tragedy: facing eternity without faith; dying without Christ.

Recently, I've been reading a book that really helps put this all in perspective. It's by an Estonian pastor named Harri Haamer, who, for purely religious reasons, was sentenced to 8 years of slave labor in a Soviet prison camp. During this time, he became acquainted with an educated atheist named Yevgeni, and one day Yevgeni asked him why he still clung to his faith in that

hopeless prison camp. He answered, "I'm afraid, Yevgeni... The misery we have endured has severely drained our human stamina. If our situation should worsen, I am afraid I could not survive without God." "Oh, don't worry..." the atheist tells him, "our education and upbringing will keep our heads about water. I promise you that..." Pastor Haamer didn't argue the point, but he certainly doubted whether simple education and upbringing could preserve his human dignity and maintain the purity of his embattled spirit.

Shortly thereafter, Yevgeni was taken away, but as fate would have it, the two did meet again. And when they did, what a difference in Yevgeni! Filthy language. Filthy attitude. He had absorbed the evils around him – and was proud of it! "But what happened to your education and upbringing," Pastor Haamer asked. "They went the way of all flesh," Yevgeni explained. So then Pastor Haamer said, "Remember when you asked me why I believe in God? Now I can answer you. He has not deserted me. I lived among thieves for seven months, and none of their influence has rubbed off on me. I have not lost my human dignity or my hope to once again fulfill my high calling as a real human being. I have not been disappointed by my unending faith in God." "But why do you need...human dignity here?" Yevgeni countered. "You're dressed in rags, starving, scorned, homeless, stripped of all rights and all hope. Ultimately, you're going to end up somewhere among those rocks" – by which he meant the cemetery. But Pastor Haamer knew better. "Stripped of hope? Never! We will not end up among those rocks. We will end up in heaven." "In heaven!" Yevgeni sneered. But then large tears began to flow. "What's wrong?" Pastor Haamer asked. Slowly, bitterly, Yevgeni hissed, "I envy you religious people!"

Not surprisingly, the book is entitled, We Shall Live In Heaven. And that is the truth we need to cling to! That is the good news we need to share! Thanks to Jesus, we shall live in heaven! *This world is* a dangerous place. Tragedies happen all too often. Miracles are rare and only temporary. But this world is not all there is. An infinitely better life is waiting for us, and it is ours as a gift of grace. To avoid the ultimate tragedy, we need but receive this ultimate gift and trust the ultimate Giver, Jesus Christ. For He who once said to the Widow of Nain, "**Do not weep,**" has given us even more reason for comfort and hope. Jesus may not wave a magic wand over this life, but He has promised, "**My grace will be sufficient for you.**" He may not spare us the trials of this world, but He has promised "**peace such as the world cannot give.**" Most of all, Jesus has promised, "**Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.**" He has promised, "**Whoever believes in Me, though they die, yet shall they live.**" He has promised, "**Because I live, you will live also.**" And never forget what that means! Whatever twists and turns our path through this life may take, whatever troubles or tragedies we may face, our destination is guaranteed! That is the assurance we take home with us today. Like Pastor Haamer said, "*Stripped of hope? Never! We will not end up among those rocks. We will end up in heaven.*" Amen.