

My Recording

St. Luke, Chapter 7, verses 11 through 17:

"Soon after healing the centurion slave, Jesus went to a town called Nain and His disciple 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." And He came forward, he 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 ceased 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 of the surrounding country."

Here ends the reading from the Gospel of Luke. So the story of the Widow of Nain is pretty dramatic. It raises some interesting questions for me that I'd like to talk with you all about. Jesus has just, if you remember, healed the slave for the Roman officer and we've shifted from the Gospel of St. John to the Gospel of Luke in our readings these last couple weeks. And one thing you'll notice in the difference between the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of John; they're both the story of Jesus, is that John is the more mystical, more spiritual Gospel. A lot of people would say the more Swedenborgian Gospel, and Luke is known historically to be a physician and it's a healing gospel and it's full of miracles whereas John doesn't have as many. So that's an interesting difference. So we're hearing a lot of healing and this is our second healing and this is a resurrection from the dead. And when I read the text as you know, I always read it and I say "What am I curious about? What makes me curious?" And I'll be really honest, when I read this text I was curious and I had really three questions as I was preparing the sermon. And the one

was: "Why did He raise this child up and not others?" To me it seemed a little arbitrary, that was one question: why the widow of Nain's son, and raise him from the dead, and why not everybody else? That was one.

The other question was: Why not miracles today? Why don't we have these miracles today? Why can't spiritual leaders raise people from the dead? And then of course the third question that I always ask when I'm thinking about a message is: So what does this have to do with us? What's the relevance to our daily lives? And when I looked at the first question, I had a bit of an uh-huh moment, when I realized that Jesus was moved by compassion. He had seen a widow; a widow who lost her only son. So she has lost her husband, she's now lost her child and of course in that world, she's lost all economic opportunity. So she's losing on all fronts and He has compassion on her. And I thought "We often talk about the free will of ourselves but what about the free will of God?" And this is an example of God just being moved by a compassionate impulse to do something really beautiful. And I thought it was fantastic. And then I thought "Okay, so why miracles then and why not miracles now?" And the best answer that I've had on this is actually from Swedenborg, who is the Christian Mystic that this church is founded on his teachings and he basically says "Jesus performed miracles in that time and space for very specific reasons: One, it sent a message to the people of just compassion and caring so it had that human-it met human need okay. But it also had another powerful message which was: it taught people about the power of God;" two things at once. "And that if God constantly did miracles forever, we would lose our free will because if I, every week you could come in I could heal this and solve that...we'd certainly increase the follower-ship but why would they be following? That's the question- the free will would be lost. So I thought those were interesting things and then what does it have to do with us? It occurred to me that I was being short-sighted in saying there aren't miracles happening right now. They're not happening the way that it did for Jesus but we through God's blessing have evolved in this world and our science has evolved and our medicine has evolved.

Many of you know, we talked about it many times- my father on April 5th arrived at the emergency room of St. Mary's Hospital with no pulse, at 88 years old. 10 years ago he would have been dead, probably; 20 years for sure- a person of that age right? And the doctor said "It's a miracle that your father is alive." And I thought "You know, we are extending life on this planet. I was involved, as I've talked about before, with the people with AIDS. We found drugs and there are people alive all over the world that would have been dead for not having these drugs. So in a way, in the modern world, thanks to the evolution of rational thinking and science, God is working and extending our lives, so much so that maybe Russ, you'll live to be like 150, the rest of us, I don't know but the next generation-it looks like the life span will really, really grow. That is a miracle: human life can go on for many years. But this is the question: remember how Jesus did it for two reasons: one was the physical and the other was the spiritual, I think a crisis for us in this time and place is that we are extending the quantity of life but I don't know that our spiritual teachings have caught up. I don't know that we're extending the quality of life; the spiritual life. Will people be happy being here longer? I think that's a big question. We have to marry the Spirit to the technology because we know that ultimately that little boy of Nain that was risen; he later died, as did Lazarus right, they later died. Eventually all of us here will die; we'll all experience that loss. But the one thing that will go on is our spirit. And the question is how do we develop our spirit? How do we have a quality life? A life built on purpose and spirit? And who's teaching that?

As Church decreases in popularity and interest, I think it's a really open question. Now here's a statistic I'm going to give you a quiz and ask you do you think that people who go to church more are more happy or less happy? Anybody want to venture a guess? More happy or less happy? Yes, go ahead. More happy. Dramatically so, so much so that if you go to church once a year, your happiness is at a certain level; once a month it's a higher level of happiness; every week is another; the highest level of happiness. I think the reason we don't know it is because the social sciences are secular and not pro-spirituality and religion. That's an amazing statistic it's one of the most fascinating statistics. There

are other ways to measure happiness but if you tell me that you go to church four times, some spiritual community, it doesn't have to be church but if you're involved in a spiritual community of some kind, you're more likely to be happy. I like to think that it's because you're investing in that quality of life; you're investing in the eternal part of life; you're investing in purpose and you're meeting with other people and you're committing to do good in the world. And that's my own theory but nobody quite knows what the reality is. But in a society where social capital, a time we join together and do something, is decreasing, the fact that some people are coming in who are seeking to understand our own spiritual development more, does lead to happiness. So maybe this church and this community really has something to offer to the greater society who is making amazing technological advances. It is a miracle. Life is being extended. But let us be a place and a people that can actually help in developing a quality of life and a connection to God.

Amen.