

**“Who’s In Charge?”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade**  
**Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**Sunday, June 6, 2010**  
**Scripture: Luke 7:11-17**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION:** *God of abundant life, your grace is our daily bread. Nourish us by your Word and fill us with your Spirit so that we may grow in faith and love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

As you might remember I attended a Preaching Conference in Nashville a couple of weeks ago. It was truly an amazing week, and I am always grateful to all of you for these times away for education and networking. At this particular conference, each day included two worship services, three lectures about preaching and a music program in the evening. In addition to all of those opportunities, and the meals together, there were also several small group events in which we could take part.

While I really enjoyed and learned from every event, class and service I attended, I did have one favorite, speaker/preacher. Her name is Susan Sparks and the thing which really hit home for me was the joy with which she presented everything. Whether she was teaching, preaching or leading discussions, those of us in her presence were fully aware that she had been in the company of Jesus.

Susan introduced herself to us by telling us that her first career was as a lawyer. She also said, though, that she didn’t feel totally fulfilled in that profession, so she began to work in the evenings as a stand-up comic. She told us about how her work took her from North Carolina to New York and how different she found the cultures between those two places. Those of you who have lived in both the north and south of our country might recognize the truth of what she said.

She told us that one of the things which

astounded her the most was the difference in the greetings. She said that in New York greetings are very short. Most often you will be greeted with “Yo”, and on a really good day, it might be “Yo – Yo”.

In the south, though, she says there are four major parts to any greeting. First there is initial word – “Hey”, for instance, which you stretch out as long as you can. Then comes the utterance of words which really don’t mean anything - for example, “ah, uh, oh, ooh”. Third, a greeting isn’t a greeting at all unless you compliment the person. She said, though, that you really need to be specific to make sure they know you are sincere. You can’t just say, “You look good”, you have to add something like, “I love your shoes!” And the last part, which she says is the most important part of all is asking about a family member. So, are you ready for me to put all of this together for you? Here goes!

“Hey-y-y-y-y, uh, ah, oh, you look terrific. I love your shoes! How’s your mama?”

She told us lots of other stories, too, which kept us laughing, but also kept us fully aware that her call to the ministry – as unusual as it may seem – was genuine and true. You see, when Susan first began to feel God’s nudges to the ministry, she couldn’t figure out what in the world God would want with a day-time lawyer-night time comic. In order to try and understand this call she sensed, she quit both of her jobs, sold her house, stored all her furniture and traveled the world for two years.

During that time, she worked for a time with Mother Teresa in India. She told us of the first day she visited an orphanage and how a little girl came up and pulled on her skirt. Susan sat down on the floor and the little girl climbed up on her lap. She then put her ear against Susan’s chest and began to laugh. Her laughter caused Susan to laugh, and the two of them sat for quite a while just rocking back and forth

laughing.

After a while one of the orphanage workers came up to them and said, “That’s Anna. She is five years old and she has been deaf and blind since birth. She senses the presence of people by the vibrations created when they walk by. And her favorite thing in the whole world is to experience someone’s laughter.”

Susan said she sat there for quite a while rocking and laughing with Anna. And when it was time for her to leave, she went outside, only to hear in her heart God ask, “So now do you get it?”

I think all these things came to mind when I began working on my sermon for today, because it seems to me that that is what our Gospel story is saying. As I read and re-read our lesson for today what I kept hearing was the question “Who’s in Charge?”

The scene about which we read is pretty dramatic when you think about it. Here was a funeral procession halted and the trip to the cemetery interrupted. Of course it was not anything like a funeral procession in our time – a black Cadillac hearse, followed by one or more black Cadillac limousines, followed perhaps by several cars, lights on, concerned not to lose their place in the line in the traffic.

No, this scene was at once more primitive and personal. There was no city traffic to contend with in this procession. No indifferent motorists disturbed that they were delayed a few minutes for the funeral. No – this is a village scene, people on foot, following the widowed mother who is following the professional mourners with their cymbals, flutes and high-pitched shrieking and wailing.

It is a Palestinian village scene in Nain, just a short distance from Nazareth, (Jesus’ hometown), and a day’s walk from Capernaum (Jesus’ newly, adopted town). The pallbearers are carrying the body of a young man in a long

wicker basket covered by a shroud for burial outside the city. What we learn from Luke's words is that the dead man was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. All the pain and sorrow of the ages is contained in that statement. You see, in a patriarchal society like the one in Jesus' time, orphans, such as this young man, and widows, like his mother, were regarded as vulnerable, weak and without much opportunity for economic support. Nonetheless, a great crowd followed the procession, indicating sympathy and support at least for the time being.

That's drama enough – a large crowd of caring people – but now there is more. Jesus approaches, apparently coming from Capernaum where he just healed the Roman Centurion's slave. He saw the widowed, desolate mother, had compassion for her. "Do not weep," he told her. And in the continuing drama, risking ceremonial impurity, he reached out, touched the body, and the procession halted.

If we ever wonder in our lives, when nothing seems to go right, when the world and everyone in it seems to be against us, certainly this story should give us encouragement. Really – talk about rising above discouragement! Talk about overcoming the greatest obstacle to human fulfillment. Talk about overcoming life's defeats: this was it – Jesus raising this young man from the dead. Jesus didn't raise everybody physically from the dead, of course, just as he didn't heal everyone with whom he came in contact. But...what he did do then and still does today, is help everyone rise above discouragement.

Biblical scholar William Barclay says: "We live in a world of broken hearts." Indeed we do. Our world is not an easy place in which to live. While God created it and called it good, once we, as God's children, started invoking our own control, the good world has become increasingly troubled. Who – twenty years ago ever heard of El Nino or La Nina? Who –

twenty years ago ever thought about the Ozone Layer, or Global Warming? And who – even ten years ago would have worried about an oil spill which would affect every single life form in our world? Indeed, we need to think about, pray about, and work towards fixing all these terrible things. But --- if we don't remember who is in charge, we can do as much damage as good.

As difficult as all these big picture things are, though, the fact of the matter is that we don't even need to turn to any newspaper for an accounting of the world's troubles and sorrows. We only need to look at our own friends and neighbors and families. We only need to look at our own lives and into our own hearts.

It was the Divine Power which spoke to the dead young man that day long ago in the village of Nain. It was a dramatic sight – and one as rare in the time of Jesus as it is now. But in our time and in all times, the power of the living Christ raises people up from discouragement, despondence, despair and even from death, itself. And to accept, receive and celebrate this truth all we have to do is remember who's in charge.

May it be so for you and for me.  
Amen.

*Thanks to King Duncan for his sermon, "Why Jesus Didn't Perform Funerals", Maruice A. Fetty for his sermon, "How To Rise Above Discouragement", Susan Sparks for her comments at the 2010 Festival of Homelitics,*

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