

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of grace and relationship, we often do not find what it means to be connected. In this world that is full of ways to connect, we struggle with how to be community. We have phone calls, email, texting, instant messaging, and long-distance face-to-face methods, but somehow, we lose the very essence of what it means to be in relationship with those around us, near and far. With so many ways of staying in contact, our culture struggles to find real intimacy with one another, to demonstrate our real joys and real pains that come along with being a human being.

Holy God, we see true connection and true life being demonstrated by our Lord Jesus Christ. In the midst of real pain, he demonstrates new life. While we cannot hope for the same kind of new life among us with the raising of the dead in our every day lives, help us to find what it means to truly connect with those around us and to find new life where it presents itself. Guide us to stand in awe of the great miracles Jesus provides us while not making them the end in themselves. We understand that the miracles are signs that point us to something grander, something more important: the ongoing gospel of new life that you provide to all who seek you. Help us to get past all the misdirection that so easily takes precedence in our lives. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord of faithful relationship, Jesus Christ, come to connect with us and to help us find connection, who taught us to pray together as one community...

SERMON

There are many ways to take in visual entertainment, anything on you see on TV. Sometimes, we just want to watch it on the surface level and just be entertained after a long day of work or when you're feeling worn out. For example, you can sit, watch, and enjoy

sports. That can be one of its great joys. Simply cheering for a team can really make you one with a community that shares one great passion. On the other hand, another way to enjoy sports is to understand every part of the game at every turn. One can take apart each play, see the tactics, understand what every player is doing and why he or she is doing it. The formations, the personnel and the movement all become key. This is especially applicable to football. As such, one of the greatest tactics of football is misdirection. You want the opposition to look the other way while you're trying to accomplish your goal. The offense is consistently seeking to get the defense out of place so it can take advantage of that. That can be through the play action pass, where you fake a handoff to the running back, or it can be through faking a pass and handing it off to the running back, for instance. The defense is trying to hide what its plans are so that they can be in the best place to stop the offense or get a turnover. Misdirection is always the key, for it puts one thing apparently ahead while there is something else going on that is really the point.

These stories also have a great misdirection, but while that is necessary in football, in scripture, it's not that we are intended to be misdirected in these stories. The stories of Elijah and Jesus really go hand-in-hand with their relationships to these women in the scriptures and the connections with their sons. While we want to focus naturally on the miracles of raising the sons from the dead, that is never really the point of the stories. No, the focus is naturally upon the women, their sufferings, and how they are called into a form of new life by Jesus and Elijah. Through the actions of Elijah and Jesus, the women find comfort and a future in the midst of their difficulty.

Elijah and Jesus saw humanity where other people would not. Elijah was served in a dire time by this widow, and in her time of need, he restored life to this woman's son. What

makes this story so amazing is that he finds faithfulness with this woman even though she was not from Israel; she didn't even worship the God of Israel! Scripture says very clearly that she tells Elijah, "As the LORD your God lives..." Elijah and God, it seems, crosses borders to find faithfulness, beyond the bounds of what we would think a faithful person is. In the next story of Jesus, One comment offered up about this story in the podcast "Sermon Brainwave" is that Jesus' first statement is totally ridiculous. Think about how difficult that would sound if someone would come up to you and say that in her situation. I would be in deep trouble with my pastoral care instructors if I told a care receiver what Jesus said to this woman: "Do not weep." That comment by itself is not about fostering relationship and being with another person. For me, it would be heartless, but for Jesus, it is just part one that leads to the next part. As they said, what validates that statement is what comes after it: "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The widow is not without her son anymore. Obviously, these two stories are linked. The people around Jesus remember that story of Elijah, and they call Jesus a prophet in the same tradition. However, Jesus offers so much more.

So, the question is, what is the point? We are led to believe through the basic narrative of the story that the point is that Elijah, the prophet of God, and Jesus, the Messiah, are able to bring people back from the dead. Therefore, should we say that these are stories mainly about the miracle of raising people from the dead? I would venture to say that it is not the point. We take such awe at the miracles of Jesus, from restoring sight to the blind, allowing people to walk once again, and we want to celebrate them. However, as people of faith, that's just like watching a football game without really thinking about what is happening behind the scenes to produce the action of the game. These are

meaningful stories about great men of God raising people to life once again, but there is a deeper message that is just as applicable to us today. This ensemble is much more than the restoration of two widows' sons to life. It is about reclaiming the future in the midst of so much darkness. It's about fostering new life and new relationship. Both examples show a widow who has lost her only son in a world where men dominate. Each woman has so little hope of making it on her own, since not only being a woman, but being a widow put her at a major disadvantage. You are a second-class citizen, barely a person, so in this society, you don't have a chance really to make it on your own. Elijah and Jesus, as representatives of the Most High God who loves all people, no matter what society has to say, gives both of them a chance at new life.

If there is any ongoing thread throughout the bible, this has to be it. Perhaps you've heard me preach on it before, and I'll probably preach on it again. I think this is one of the greatest messages of scripture. God is a God of new life, and God keeps providing new life to all throughout the scripture. This new life is greater than the last. It's not about just finding new life as a follower of Christ but coming time and time again find newness where there once was something old. Being a follower of Christ does not exempt us from being human, in all of its graces and all of its fallacies.

However, it always requires a death. There always seems to be misdirection around what we need to improve in our lives, but newness always must come at the expense of something old in our lives. Jesus could not come into his glory until he suffered a horrible literal death. Saul had to die figuratively to his old life before he could become the Apostle Paul. Peter had to deny Jesus three times, dying to his status as a faithful disciple, before he could become the great Christian leader we see in the book of Acts. Moses had to be exiled

from Egypt and face the burning bush, a dying to his old life, to become the great prophet of the exodus. These women could not claim a new life until they had their sons, their main way of making a living, die. After the death, then the people could come into new life in all its forms.

Our lives are full of misdirection. Culture calls us toward things they call important which really don't matter in the long run. Our world tells us that self-improvement is about getting the newest thing immediately or working on the most insignificant things. The cultural church thinks that just coming to church is more than enough to make us feel like we are fully Christian. Instead, we are called to something else: the ongoing growth of new life in us. We aren't all called to fall off our horses and become the next great Apostle, like Paul. However, we called to hear how God is supporting us into new life. It's often not obvious; it requires we look deeply under the surface, just like these stories. To look deeply requires work and time. God loved and cared for these women when it seemed like hope was lost, and all they could see is death. God renewed their hearts and minds toward living fully. We always have places where we think there is hopelessness, and that is a place of death where we must die. From there, we can find that new life is waiting to be born and show us God's ways.

We can look at these stories two ways. We can look at them as just a story where the dead are raised and celebrate along with the mothers who have their sons restored to them. That may be a misdirection, when the action becomes more important than the overall message. On the other hand, we can seek the deeper message. We can see, just like a lot of scripture, these are stories that happen time and time again in new ways. We all suffer deaths in our lives, the daily deaths that make us mourn and things that make us

question. However, with God, we are never left in that space; we rise to new life. Endings are never just endings; they are doors to new beginnings. So many heroes and heroines of scripture have died deaths, most of them not literally, and returned to new forms of life that were far better than the first. Living into the new is not easy, but we are always asked, what deaths are we called to die and what new life are we called to live into? Thanks be to God for the new life to which we are consistently called. Amen and Amen.