



JESUS AND WOMEN **(March is Women's History Month)**

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, March 14, 2010

Shauna St. Clair, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Divinity Student, Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Nashville, TN

Lection - Luke 7:11-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 11) Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. (v. 12) 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. (v. 13) When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." (v. 14) Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" (v. 15) The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. (v. 16) Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favourably on his people!" (v. 17) This word

about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

This Sunday we focus our attention on the relationship between Jesus and women. Attention given to this aspect of Jesus' ministry is invaluable. Though two thousand years have passed since Jesus appeared as a virgin's son in Bethlehem, women still bear the brunt of society's patriarchy, sexism, classism and cultural biases. Just as we acknowledge that Israel was not free of such prejudices, we must also admit the impact of this continued discrimination within our congregations. This Sunday, we explore Jesus' ministry to one woman to learn how we are to speak life amidst and in opposition to the death-dealing realities women face.

Studies on the poverty rates for men and women of all ages from 1950 to 1996 show that blacks have much higher poverty rates than whites, regardless of their sex; and women have much higher rates than men, regardless of their race.¹ "The dimensions of poverty include a short life, illiteracy, exclusion, and lack of material means."² The US tax system continues to favor the wealthy and recent global economic declines have harshly impacted the middle class, the working poor, and the unemployed and elderly. This along with job losses in manufacturing and wages that have not kept pace with the economy (the hourly minimum wage only reached \$7.25 in July 2009; from 1997 to 2007 it did not rise.)³ I believe have increased the "feminization of poverty."

In the 1990s, whereas only 8 percent of female-headed households were living below the poverty line in Sweden, 39 percent were in the United States.⁴ According to some researchers, "West and North European states, with more comprehensive welfare systems, have avoided the extent and depth of the feminization of poverty that exists in the United States."⁵ This does not bode well for women in the United States and it casts a particularly dark shadow over the future of black women and girls.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Luke 7:11-17

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Jesus interacted with women during a time when women had few legal and financial rights. A patriarchal system gave responsibility of women to their fathers, husbands, and male children. Women, who through natural circumstances became older, widowed, and childless, such as the woman in today's text, found their very survival at stake.

While we can rejoice in the many advancements in women's rights since Jesus' day, we must also acknowledge what has not changed. As Christians, we find ourselves in a society in which women are largely vulnerable to systemic patriarchy that still threatens their livelihood. Women continue to face inequalities in the workplace, socio-cultural institutions, and the Church. Single mothers are impacted by systemic inequalities and economic constraints that impact their care for themselves and their families. As an African American woman, I am inclined to ask how is it that Christians are to model Christ's care for women in a society that discriminates on the basis of race and gender. How can we appropriate Christ's message within this social order in ways

that not only help women to survive within harmful systems but also empower women and men to bring about liberation by pulling down such strong holds?

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

In Luke 7:11, we find Jesus with a crowd of followers entering the town of Nain, and they are met by a funeral procession that is leaving town. At the city gates, a mother is weeping. Her tears mark the loss of her only son. Many mourning parents who have shed the same tears as this mother testify that nothing compares to the devastation of losing a child. But we are quickly told that this is not the only loss she has endured. Her son's death was preceded by that of her husband. And, if the sting of losing her husband and then son is not enough to crush her, this will not be her only burden. She lives in a culture where women encounter gender inequality in property ownership, job opportunities, and access to resources. When the funeral procession ends, the crowd will depart, and she will have to return to the agony of another empty chair at the dinner table. She will have to face the bill collectors with no prospects of any income. How will this woman care for herself and any remaining members in her family?

It is in this scene of despair that we find Jesus entering into this woman's chaos intent on offering hope and life. There is much to be learned about the nature of Christ through this brief encounter in Nain.

To begin, when Jesus enters this woman's chaos he sees her in her moment of distress and has compassion for her tears. As the casket and crowd draw near Jesus, he not only sees the deceased son and the community that has joined this woman for another woeful farewell but this passage says that Jesus sees a mourning woman, and her tears matter. Jesus has compassion on this emotionally wrought and financially vulnerable grieving widow and mother. Jesus' attention and compassion for one who represents the overlooked and undervalued in his society makes it incumbent upon us to see women as neighbors who are hurting, understand that their pain is significant and that their personhood valuable.

Second, in this instance, when Jesus enters this woman's death-dealing reality, he does not find her alone. Though she has lost much of her family, her community walks with her. This fact does not seem to imply that the community is the impetus for Jesus' interaction with her. This is a patriarchal society, yet this community does not wash their hands of her out of apathy toward a system gone bad. They do not close their doors hoping not to be inconvenienced by her pain or potential needs. Instead, they carry her son's casket and walk by her side in her distress. The actions of the community Jesus encounters remind us of the responsibility of communities to walk *with* those suffering among us. This is the least we must do.

Finally, when Jesus enters into this woman's world, he is moved to promote life where there is so much death. The divine response of Christ who sees a weeping woman and has compassion and a community that does not abandon its brokenhearted is life-giving *action*. While it is important that Jesus sees this woman, comforting that he shows compassion, and encouraging that her community is present; this woman is in need of more than presence. She is in need of a miracle!

Jesus tells her not to cry. However, this is not an attempt to quiet her appropriate response to her tear-invoking circumstance. He is not chastising her emotional state, nor is he assuaging his society's guilt by asking her to show no sign of her pain. No, Jesus quiets her tears because he intends to transform the circumstances that cause her pain. Jesus then speaks one simple phrase, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The impact of this resurrecting phrase is exponential. A son is brought back to life, and a mother gets a restored relationship, peace of mind and a means of survival. Finally, a community that walked with her in her pain comes to know a prophet that is risen *among them* and the character of God that looks favorably on God's people who are in crisis (v. 16).

Jesus' interaction with this one woman in distress brings transformation to her life, her family, her community and her broader society. When we begin to speak life to the situations causing death, pain, and hopelessness to the women in our world, we embody Christ's presence and reveal the nature of God to humanity.

Celebration

To speak of Jesus and women is to search for ways that the power of Christ, through us, can bring life to damming circumstances faced by women in our society day in and day out. We can, with all the creativity that exists in the power of God, find means to not only speak life when we encounter death but also to counteract systems that threaten the lives of vulnerable women among us. These women are threatened when natural deadly circumstances and systemic discrimination collide. We as women and communities that support women, by Christ's resurrection power, can tear down the strong holds in our world that threaten the very lives of women.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: A cacophony of mourning sounds accompanying the casket procession: Wailing cries, whimpering, muffled sniffing; perhaps music filled with tonalities of mourning and the shifting of bodies and sandaled feet on rough terrain; the radical shifting of sounds as wailing turns to shouting and dancing as the young man sits up in his coffin; and

Sights: The weight of the coffin on the shoulders of those carrying it; the facial expressions of friends and loved ones; the anguished face of a mother looking at her son's casket, and the amazed looks on faces as a dead son rises out of a casket.

Notes

1. McLanahan, Sara and Erin Kelly. (1999). "Feminization of Poverty: Past and Future." Ed. J. Chafetz, *Handbook of Gender Sociology*. (127-145) New York, NY: Plenum. Also available on Network of the family and the economy. Online location www.apps.olin.wustl.edu/macarthur accessed 5 November 2009

2. Moghadam, Valentine. SHS Papers in Women's Studies/Gender research, No. 2 "The 'Feminization of Poverty' And Women's Human Rights," July 2005, Gender Equality and

Development Section, Division of Human Rights (Social And Human Sciences Sector), UNESCO. Online location: <http://www.portal.unesco.org/shs/en/files> accessed 5 November 2009.

3. See the website of the US Department of Labor for more information on the minimum wage. Online location: <http://www.dol.gov> accessed 5 November 2009.

4. Women's Department of the Department of Labor. Online location: <http://www.dol.gov> accessed 5 November 2009

5. Casper, L., Sarah McLanahan, and I. Garfinkel. (1994). "The gender poverty gap: What we can learn from other countries." *American Sociological Review*. 59, 594-605.