

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 71:1-6

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

The Gospel passage from Luke for today is about Jesus healing a woman in the synagogue on the sabbath. There was much controversy that day when he decided to do that. And that was what I thought this sermon was going to highlight. But as sometimes happens, life itself intruded and steered me in another direction. All of us can relate to the scripture passage today because each of us has had some experience with painful and debilitating illness. We can well imagine how grateful this woman felt when the malady of 18 years of pain and frustration was removed from her. It's easy to imagine that she thanked Jesus and told everyone she encountered on that day and on many days that followed how grateful she was to the healer and preacher, Jesus, and how much she had come to believe that he did, indeed, have powers far beyond those of mere mortals. The controversy with the synagogue hierarchy was not that Jesus had healed someone within the walls of the synagogue, but that he had done it on the Sabbath. You see, the synagogue hierarchy considered curing someone or treating someone for illness was considered 'work'. Jesus, on the other hand, considered it a loving gesture to release this woman from years and years of pain and disability. The argument wasn't about whether or not Jesus healed her. The argument was whether not the actions he took to cure her were to be considered work. For Jesus, it was a simple matter of care and concern that one of God's children needed to be released from suffering...and Jesus had both the power and the authority to do that. Relieving pain and suffering is part of love and love is what God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit are all about.

But the gospel lesson this morning is not what intruded on my sermon writing time. Something far more important than a lesson about Jesus' healing a woman some 2,000+ years ago is what intruded on me. It has more to do with what Jesus is doing today...in northern Virginia...for people who are hurting. They aren't struggling with a debilitating illness of many decades. They are dealing with broken hearts and paralyzing grief that can have no other cure than God's love and the passage of time. The price we pay for deep love and strong connections with another human being is the possibility that either they or we will be faced with the inevitability of death that will separate us from each other...at least temporarily...and cause deep emotional pain...that we label as 'grief.' Jesus knew what that was like. Jesus wept for his friend, Lazarus, when he heard that Lazarus had died...even though he knew that he would raise Lazarus from the dead and restore him to his family and friends. Jesus knew that Lazarus would be restored to all who loved him and yet...Jesus wept for Lazarus when he arrived at the tomb and found it

sealed. Jesus experienced the same grief reaction that we humans experience when someone we love dies. Jesus knew that he was going to resurrect Lazarus, but still he wept when he reached the tomb. Jesus was not spared the emotional pain of being parted from his dear friend even though Jesus knew that Lazarus was going to be resurrected and they would be together again. The grief of that separation was overwhelming to Jesus and he knew how it was going to turn out. He knew that this was not a permanent separation between him and his best friend, Lazarus...and still, he grieved.

Jesus must know and understand then how we humans feel when we are parted by death from someone we love...someone who has become an integral part of our lives. Even if we believe strongly in the resurrection, we still grieve as we endure the separation. The separation is painful and no matter what we believe that we believe, it's hard to imagine the reunion that Jesus has promised to each of us. These partings tend to have a cumulative effect as well...even if we are sure down to our bones that it's a temporary state of affairs...one loss compounds another that compounds another and sometimes it's just too much to bare. Jesus knows that about death and resurrection and reunion and Jesus also knows how hard it is for us to bare the separation...no matter how long or how short it is. The separation hurts. As one of my friends told me once as we sat prayerfully waiting for the funeral service to begin, "You never go to just one funeral." Every time you go to a funeral, you re-live all the funerals you have been to before. As we get older and that experience is cumulative, it seems even harder to bear. As time goes by, our human nature tends to entertain doubt about whether or not we will ever be reunited with the ones who are no longer here with us in this life. And at times it seems completely unfair that the price for loving someone is so high when separation by the death of one of us is inevitable. But that separation...as painful as it is....is only temporary. Jesus has seen to that. By Jesus' promise, we will be re-united with the ones we love. Because of Jesus, that reunion is guaranteed. And Jesus stands with us with his arms around us as we weep for the ones we miss who are temporarily lost to us. If Jesus is not all about love, all about caring for others, all about restoring others, and all about providing relief for others in this world, then what IS Jesus about?

The synagogue hierarchy was all over Jesus about doing 'work' on the Sabbath in the synagogue when what Jesus was actually doing was providing relief and comfort and restoration to a human being in pain. If providing that relief and comfort qualifies as 'work' then we are all in trouble. If every kind gesture of sympathy and comfort is to be considered 'work,' then what is love all about? Does that, then, make 'love' some kind of 'work' that we do as human beings? That hardly qualifies us as human, does it?

The death that intruded into my life and into the life of my family was a young man...not too young, he was 52 years old...who's been in our family circle since he was 15 years old and began dating our daughter. He was around when my husband died and my children lost their

father. My husband was crazy about him and the feeling was mutual. His name was Greg and he was a prince of a fellow....the kind of person you just like to be around and the kind of person who was never too busy to pull someone else's ox out of the ditch. He was the sort of guy who sucked the air out of the room! Hopefully, all of us have at least one friend like that. He was the sort of person you could go for months without contact, but 30 seconds into the next conversation it's as if no time at all had gone by. We all have friends like that. They are irreplaceable. He has left behind, his parents, two siblings, a wife and two teenage sons...along with a huge hole in his family...and a hole in ours and many others.

And my friend was right. You never go to just one funeral. This past week, I've also spent time in my own mind at my own father's funeral when he was 41 years old and I was just 13 years old; and my own husband's funeral when he was 46 years old and I was 45 years old. I was much too young on each occasion to fully process what had just happened. But Jesus has paved the way for our reunions and I'm looking forward to them! The love and kindness we share with one another is never 'work' as the synagogue hierarchy implied. Healing hurting souls is never work. Love and kindness are gifts freely given to those of us who haven't earned it and don't deserve it. Because we are children of Almighty God and because Jesus came to be with us to breach the gap between us, we have many happy reunions to anticipate with great joy and thankfulness.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.
