

*Texts: Psalm 119:105-107; Luke 7:1-17*

*Subject: Raising the Widow's Son*

*Theme: More Than We Asked For*

*Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Feb. 7, 2021; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

We're already a month into the new year, and we're praying and hoping that we will soon be able to gather again for worship and more. There has been some positive news from companies looking to hire new employees, some workers are on the strip have started back, and our county continues to trend downward in new COVID cases. We're trying to make sense of the trauma we've all been through, and one of the things we often find ourselves asking, *where is God in all of this?* Where is our divine healer, the one who protects, who watches our going out and coming in, who we proclaim is always near, always with us?

The presence of God in the world exists through the Word. Author and Bible scholar Chad Bird has a really great devotional book out called *Unveiling Mercy*, and this week he reminded me that it was the Word that came to Abram and promised to make of him a great nation. The Word came to Jeremiah and made him a prophet. The Word was made flesh and moved into the neighborhood in Jesus. This Word creates. This Word heals. This Word gives and forgives. This Word is powerful. It comes to us, calls us, and changes us, and the Word does what it came to do.

Each one of you that hears this Word and trusts in the promise is a disciple, a follower of Jesus, the living Word. We are also all ministers, a priesthood of believers, charged with sharing the Word when we leave from here, living it, and making more disciples. We don't do it alone - the Word has power to do even *more than we asked for*.

In our church, pastors are ones ordained, that is, set apart to preach and preside, and are called ministers of *Word* and Sacrament. The word *sacrament* comes from the Latin, *sacramentum*, which was a military oath of loyalty. Pastors and deacons, too - those called to Word and Service in the church and community, proclaim the Word, the Gospel over our lives together, and that Word brings us to faith. Now, in the church, sacraments are what we call those rites and rituals, appointed by Christ, where God's *Word* of grace, draws especially near to us, to forgive us, to bring us to new life with Christ. The *Word* comes along with a sign, something that our human senses can recognize easily. We hear and have the *Word* and water in baptism, and we speak the *Words* of institution and share the wine and the bread with the words, "for you."

The Word is with us.

Over the last eleven months, we've been able to worship online and to share the Word of God through social media, emails, and printed words sent through the mail. And while we grieve the loss of physical proximity, and the events we'd planned, the sacrifices we've made over the last year have helped to keep us safe. But they do come with a cost. So many have felt isolated, frustrated, fearful at times, and just bored. Our mental health has suffered. We need to get moving, we need be together, we need healing.

We all need to be healed in some way. Maybe your healing story has happened, or maybe it is yet in the future. We love to hear stories of healing, and I've been so glad to know friends and families who have struggled with COVID-19 diagnoses and pulled through, after receiving life-saving care from doctors and nurses. We try to avoid illness and pain. But it's often a part of the story of all of our lives.

If you're reading along with us, you'll know that just a few chapters back we read about when Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law and a man in the synagogue. Today in these readings from Luke's gospel, we get stories of Jesus healing complete strangers. First, we hear of a centurion in Capernaum. He's a leader of a unit of 100 Roman soldiers - usually sent out to far flung cities and towns to keep the peace. He had a slave, a servant, the word in greek is *doulos* (δουλος). Certainly for Americans this word will remind us of the historic and abhorrent practice of slavery in our nation. In the ancient world it could be different, and this one is said to be 'of great value' to the military man. Is this more than economic value? We can at least know that he cares for him and does not want him to die from his illness. The centurion has been supportive of the Jewish community - they tell Jesus "he loves our people." He helped build the synagogue there, and they call him worthy of Jesus' help. Notice that he doesn't come to Jesus himself, but sends some Jewish elders out to ask for a favor.

Jesus goes to serve as he's asked, but before he can get there the centurion sends his men out to speak for their leader. He sends word that he is NOT worthy of having Jesus come into the home, and asks Jesus to only *speak the word*, and his servant would be healed. He understands authority, and knows Jesus can do what he has asked. He believes that Jesus will heal with only the Word. And Jesus is *amazed* - in a good way. This is the *only* place in the whole New Testament that we hear Jesus is positively amazed - he'll later be amazed at the lack of faith in Jerusalem, but here it's a recognition of great faith from this non-Jewish military man. He is supposedly loyal to the emperor, he has taken an oath, yet his support of the community and his trust in

Jesus show he might just be leaning toward following in a new way. When they return to the house, the sent ones find the servant “in good health.” He was healed.

We can only imagine how this experience must have changed the centurion. The book of Acts tells of the conversion and baptism of Cornelius, a centurion, who becomes the first gentile to officially become a follower of Jesus after his resurrection. Were they one and the same? Could be. This experience was powerful enough to change his whole household - and more. The Word was there.

A while later, Jesus was on his way into a small town called Nain (which was not far from another town where the prophet Elisha raised the son of a widow). Jesus sees the funeral procession headed out of the gate, where a mother who had lost her only son was followed by a large crowd. This son would have been the one to provide for her, to protect her, and with him now dead, she would have to rely on the help of others in the community, or suffer in poverty until her own death. Unlike the previous story, there’s no way Jesus could have known the son or the woman’s faith. Instead of amazement, Luke tells us Jesus feels *compassion*. He draws near to them, and does something unexpected. He touches the casket. There were no sacraments, no statements of faith. No one asked him to do it, and touching it according to the culture, would have caused anyone else to become ritually unclean. It’s wasn’t supposed to be done. And with a word, he calls the young man out. “Young man, I say to you, rise!” and he does. He spoke. And God was glorified. Jesus was seen as one who healed, one who brought the dead back to life, by the power of God.

When the word shows up, things happen. It’s not always what we planned, is it? And healing doesn’t come as quickly as that for most of us, but following Jesus is to

trust that this healing happens. Faith brings healing for broken hearts. Trusting that God is near can heal us when we are afraid. Hearing this word that does what it says tells us that God is still faithful, still hears us when we pray, still is renewing and redeeming the world and our own lives.

The Word is powerful. The Word of Jesus carries the authority of God and where this word is, God is glorified. Healing isn't just the absence of sickness, but that sense that God is not far from us, even as we struggle. It looks different to us as different times. It can be seeing our children learn and grow, despite the challenges they face. It can be getting through a long sleepless night of anxiety by turning us to prayer. It might show up as a deep breath by someone who struggled through COVID, or a family surrounding each other after the death of a beloved father or mother.

God is all about healing. Ever since the Word spoke the world into existence, went out from the mouths of prophets, grew in Mary's womb, and was born into time and history, lived and died, and rose again for every single one of us - it has been for healing. It keeps on coming, too - bringing renewal, redemption, reconciliation, and recovery for people and relationships, nations and neighbors, all the creatures and all of creation. Even when we don't ask, God is healing us. God is holding us together, right now through this holy and spirit-filled word of grace. "I say to you, rise!" As a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ, as your friend and neighbor, I share it with you - you pass it on, someone hears it and believes and is welcomed into the family of faith. You are healed - they are healed, we are his and we are healed in Christ Jesus.

As you hear Jesus' words of grace for you, and this word lives in you and you live as His disciples, you bring your witness to the healing and transformation that He has

given. You are also embraced by the power of the Spirit He has sent, that holds us all in faith. With whom will you share this sacrament of the Word? This Word does what it says and we get more than we asked for:

You are healed.

You are forgiven.

You are made alive. And with him, we rise, too.

Amen.