

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, Proper 5c

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1 Kings 17:17-24

First Immanuel Lutheran Church

Psalms 30

Portland, Oregon

Galatians 1:11-24

June 6, 2010

Luke 7:11-17

Death and resurrection is what Christians are all about. And death and resurrection come in many forms.

This winter we got our old turntable fixed and hauled out the ancient record albums for a marathon concert. One album was Elton John's "Yellow Brick Road," which took me way back. I hadn't given Elton John any thought at all for years, but when I saw an interview in *Parade* magazine I learned that a lot has changed for him since the 1970's.

Elton John has sold over a quarter billion records, including the world's biggest-selling single, "Candle in the Wind" re-released in memory of Princess Diana. He has an Oscar, a Tony, a vast fortune, and a reputation as the most successful singer/songwriter of his generation.

But as a younger man Elton was headed for an early demise. He was known not only for those outlandish costumes (the feathers, the rhinestones, those crazy oversized glasses) but for a life of excess ("serial romances, wild spending, alcoholism and cocaine addiction [that] went on for years"). He says, "I had no respect for myself... I thought, 'Taking drugs is making me a better person!'... [Then later] I was too proud to ask for help. I thought, 'I can solve this by myself'... It got worse and worse. I pushed away my friends... What finally opened my eyes was Ryan White."

You may remember the 12-year old boy who contracted AIDS through a blood transfusion and died in 1990. Ryan's family received death threats in their small town in Indiana, but when Elton John befriended them he was amazed by how forgiving they were in the face of all that hatred. He says being there in Ryan's last days, seeing their lack of bitterness, brought home the contrast with his own self-centered superstar life.

He thought, "Look at me. I have everything I want, and I complain about a hotel room because I don't like the wallpaper?" What happened to me? I was a nice, decent boy, and now I'm a self-obsessed drug addict. So I got sober."

He got sober, and he got busy. He did an about-face in his personal life, went through drug rehab, moved a continent away from his old druggie crowd. And he got down off what he called his "little celebrity throne" and decided to do something positive with his fame. Elton John started a foundation that has now raised over 175 million dollars to fight AIDS all over the world. He settled down with a life partner who's honest and direct, not put off by his celebrity, a man he's now united with in civil

partnership under English law. He reports, “every Saturday for 16 years, we’ve sent each other a card, no matter where we are in the world, to say how much we love each other.”

At age 62, Elton John has just marked 19 years of being sober. Who would have expected all that? It seems like every other week we bury a celebrity who’s been destroyed by fame, but how often do we hear about a life that got turned around, somehow, some way? (Parade Magazine, Dotson Rader, 2/21/2010)

Thanks be to God, resurrection does happen. Not just on the extravagant world stage, but in our homes, on our block, in Portland, Oregon. At First Immanuel. And when new life takes root, we know who to give the credit to, don’t we?

Today’s scripture story is found only in Luke. Jesus is walking through the town of Nain and comes across a funeral procession. There’s a young man who has died, probably earlier that same day, and they are preparing to bury him. There would have been mourners there, wailing loudly in solidarity with the gut-wrenching grief of that mother, a widow with no other children, now left entirely alone.

It’s unusual because nobody in that procession called on Jesus for help. Jesus initiated it, moved by the mother’s wailing, or just the waste of this young life. Scripture says he “had compassion” – that simple. His heart was moved by the death of a young man. But unlike all the others who were moved, Jesus had the power to give that man his life back.

Like the prophet Elijah in our Old Testament reading, Jesus is someone through whom God’s power shines so powerfully that he can even raise the dead to life. And we know that in time God will do the same for Jesus himself. And that through Jesus, God is raising all of us from death to life. Not just one day, at the end of our life – or someday, at the end of all time. Jesus is raising the dead to life every day.

How do these resurrections happen? When we are moved to compassion by someone’s need. Moved to compassion like Jesus was. Moved by someone in the street or in the headlines, or a friend we know. Something pierces our wall of self-protection and calls us out of ourselves. I know it’s happened to me, more than once, thanks be to God. It’s part of a daily rhythm of opening our eyes to what’s around us and growing as a person, growing in Christ.

How does resurrection happen? With the passing of years and the development of insight, with prayer and being open to God, listening to the wisdom of others. As we’re supported and challenged in a community, a congregation, we learn what it is to live a life that’s directed outward not inward. As we are forgiven by Christ, set free from our past, we learn to take risks and make choices that turn from death to life.

When resurrection happens, we know who to give the credit to – and interestingly enough, so does Elton John. He knows that forgiveness is at the heart of it all. Elton John does believe in Jesus Christ, and he got some flack for remarking that he personally pictures Jesus as a “compassionate, super-intelligent gay man who understood human problems. [He says] On the cross, he forgave the people who crucified him. [And he says] Jesus wants us to be loving and forgiving. I don’t know what makes people so cruel.” (*Parade* magazine online 2/21/10)

Well, I never dreamed I’d be quoting Elton John’s testimony in a sermon, but there it is. And I like it. In Jesus he sees compassion that touches his own life situation. Don’t we all. We do have that sense that Jesus has been where we are, that Jesus has walked in our shoes. That Jesus has joined our funeral processions and wept with us in our grief. That at the very core of who Jesus is, is that compassion and forgiveness that turns us around, that has the power to make an about-face happen.

So here’s the question: If Jesus can raise someone from the dead, what can he do with you?

What is there in your life that needs to die, in order for you to rise again? Is there self-centeredness? Is there greed? Impatience? Are there destructive habits? Is there a dead-end you’re headed toward?

Luther said that every day Christ puts us our sin to death, and every day Christ raises us to new life. Christ’s forgiveness sets us free, and Christ’s forgiveness shapes our future.

If Jesus can raise someone from the dead, what can he do with you? Well?