

LIFE, PAIN, AND DEATH
(And How to Tell the Difference)
Sermon for Pentecost 3C—Lk 7:11-17
LPC, 6/9/13

Last week, a *Washington Post* article highlighted the rising suicide rate among the middle-aged – my generation. The sharpest increase in the incidence of suicide is for men in their fifties, where the rate has risen to 30 suicides in 100,000 men, an increase of 50% between 1999 and 2010.

No formal study has analyzed this trend, but of course theories abound. Economic downturn is surely a factor. Dealing with aging issues in the youth-obsessed culture (that we helped create) is another. Personally, I find it plausible that there's a broad biological and ecological factor, where the species is somehow self-correcting for an abnormally large generation.

Whatever the experts may say about suicide, I think the simplest explanation is pain. People who commit suicide are in pain. When the desire to stop the pain increases to the point where it exceeds the instinct to survive, and certain other factors exist, like opportunity, available means and suppressed inhibitions, suicide may occur.

My best friend from childhood committed suicide. We'd grown apart in adulthood, and I hadn't seen her in years. Her first marriage had failed and when her second marriage became rocky, she couldn't bear the thought of another failure, and took her life. I called our priest, sat him down in my living room and basically told him, "You can't tell me that the church teaches she's in hell now. Whatever pain she was in she has to be out of it now, or I've no use for God." The poor man. He could see I was angry and grieving. To his credit he assured me of the infinite mercy of God.

To this day I cannot accept the traditional teaching that suicide is a mortal sin that cuts a person off permanently from the love of God. At the same time, I can see where that idea came from. Our God is the Lord of Life. To reject life is, arguably, to reject God.

If we needed a demonstration of our God as the Lord of Life, we have one here in this morning's excerpt from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus is with *a large crowd* approaching the village of Nain. Simultaneously *a large crowd* is leaving the village in funeral procession. A life parade meets a death parade head-on.

Jesus "has compassion" on the dead man's mother, a widow. His compassion is not just sympathy for her emotional state. As a woman with no living male relatives she is facing economic destitution. Remember that this is Luke writing, the person with a profound concern for the downtrodden.

Jesus revives the man and "gives him" back to his mother. Note that Jesus does not raise him for his own sake, but in order to "give him back" to somebody. If this led

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you to the conclusion that Jesus saves us not for own sake but to give us to others, you would not be wrong.

This story of the Widow of Nain and her son occurs only in the Gospel of Luke, but it recalls the better-known story of Jesus raising Lazarus in the Gospel of John.

Have you ever wondered what happened to Lazarus after his raising? He must eventually have died again. There is one theory that the same people who had Jesus killed also had Lazarus killed. It was just too dangerous for Jesus' enemies to have someone walking around that everyone knew had been raised from the dead by Jesus.

So new life for Lazarus from Jesus did not immunize Lazarus from future pain. Likewise, when Jesus gives *us* new life in baptism, it does not mean immunity from future pain for us either.

Now that we're talking about pain, let's go back to the subject of suicide. Suicide is not a rejection of life, and therefore not a rejection of God. Suicide is a rejection of pain. Here's where it gets complicated. Pain *feels like* death to a person. Doesn't it? Or, more precisely, since no one living has really experienced death to know what it feels like, pain feels like we imagine death to be.

But this is where the fallacy lies. Pain is not death. Pain is only experienced by those who live. Love, the most life-giving thing there is, may actually increase the likelihood of pain. There can be no grief where there has not been love.

Following the Lord of life means to recognize him also as the Lord of love, and to hold to the love throughout the pain. This is hard. It can feel like death at times, but it is not. It is in fact the way to life. Hold to the love, believe in the love. Love never dies. In love is life. In fact, only in love is there life.

Hold to the love.

Hold to the love.

Hold to the love.

And when life is painful and feels like death, hold extra hard to the love.

As a meditation for the next few minutes, I invite you to turn to Hymn 335 in the Hymnal, and read the words.