

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, JUNE 6, 2010
Second Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Psalm 146; 1 Kings 17:8-24; Luke 7:11-17

WEEPING WIDOWS AND DEAD SONS

My message today is basically about healing. I call it “Weeping Widows and Dead Sons.” When I choose a topic after reading the Bible passages for the week, I begin to think about it. I think and think before I even begin to study or write anything down, because I want to find a way to connect everything and to make it have meaning and sense.

For many years now, probably twenty at least, I have felt that our country needs a healing balm, a balm of integrity, forgiveness, confession, and honor. I have hoped that it would come from the leaders of our land, either religious or political, or maybe even from the media or academia. But to my mind many of those leaders seem to be lacking in those qualities. Then, this week we got a dose of what it means to have integrity and honor, to be contrite and to give forgiveness. And the biggest surprise of all is the source. It came not from religious leaders or political leaders, our lesson in doing right came from the sports world— of all places!

Most of you have probably heard the story. There are three main characters in this great American drama— a young Detroit Tigers’ pitcher, Armando Galarraga; the Detroit coach, Jim Leyland; and the umpire, Jim Joyce. The story is so full of human emotion that it could be the subject of grand opera. As sports writer Fay Vincent put it, “It was a teachable moment.” Galarraga was so close to pitching the perfect game: it was the ninth inning with no one of the Cleveland Indians team having made it to base. There were two outs when the next batter hit a grounder to the infield and the batter slid into first base. The umpire, Jim Joyce, called the player safe, but later was shown to have been wrong. The replay showed that he was definitely out. In baseball replays are not allowed to change the call of the umpire.

This is what happened next in Vincent's words: "As soon as Joyce saw the replay in the umpires' room after the game he knew he had made a tragic error. But right then, the wonderful side of baseball began to emerge. Joyce, a senior umpire, stood before the press and cameras and admitted his mistake. He did not find an excuse. He did not try to shift the blame. He acknowledged his bad call and said he was very sorry for the young pitcher who lost a small slice of baseball immortality."

As for Galarraga, now there was a man who acted in the manner of Jesus. At first he was so jubilant, knowing he had done something super, and then, all of a sudden hearing the call his jubilation came to an end. What did he do? What didn't he do? He didn't shout an obscenity, or mouth the word "WHAAAT," or stamp his foot in anger. He simply took the ball, turned around and smiled and went on with the game. Afterward, he even went to the unconsolable umpire, Joyce, and gave him a hug. "And every time since then that anyone has stuck a microphone in Galarraga's face, Galarraga has been repeated and insistent: He forgives Joyce. People make mistakes. He's proud in his own mind of what he accomplished. Please leave Joyce and his family alone."¹

The coach was a hero in his own right. He could have been the worst spoil sport of all. But his reaction was beautiful. The next day he had all his players stand and applaud the umpires as they came out on the field, because after all they are all in the game of baseball together; and then he had the young pitcher carry the batting lineup out to Umpire Joyce. And when Galarraga handed the paper to him and shook his hand, the emotional Irishman, Umpire Jim Joyce, began to cry. I believe that on that June day in the year of our Lord 2010 the healing hand of God intervened in American life, to assure those of us who sometimes worry about the morality of our society that there is hope for us. How refreshing to have someone take full responsibility for his

¹Leon Wolf, "The Lesson of Joyce and Galarraga," *The New Ledger*, June 5, 2010.

mistake and actually admit it was a mistake, not try to gloss it over with some excuse. How refreshing to see the person who was wronged turn the other cheek and forgive his “could be” enemy.

Jesus walked down the road in the town of Nain one day and he saw a most distressing sight. A coffin was being carried through the town, and in it was the body of the only son of a poor widow. The pitiful woman was crying in her grief and her loneliness— her despair. A great crowd of people followed her, mourning with her; and Jesus saw her. The Bible tells us of his reaction. His heart went out to her. The poor woman had lost her husband and now her son. She was alone in the world with no one to care for her, and that would have been a bad circumstance for any woman in those days. What would Jesus do?

He immediately went to the coffin and touched it which caused the pall bearers to stop. Jesus then said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” As soon as Jesus said the words, the man sat up and began to talk. I can just imagine that right about then the pall bearers probably dropped the coffin out of fright. In any event, Jesus then gave the man back to his joyful mother. This caused all the people to be amazed, and they praised God, saying surely a great prophet had come to them and God was going to help them.

This story is one of those given to us for more than one reason. In one way it is a picture of what will happen to Jesus himself. He will die and his mother will grieve, and he will be raised from the dead. In another way it is a story to give hope to all people. It is a story of the healing of sorrow and hopelessness. It is a story meant to give you hope. The people of Jesus day were living in a difficult time. Jews were under the thumb of the Romans. Life was not easy for the every day people of Judea. They yearned for a Messiah who would come and deliver them from all their troubles.

Our Old Testament lesson for today from the book of 1 Kings is another story about a weeping widow and a dead son. It is about the prophet Elijah who is sent by God to a place called Zarephath of Sidon where he will be fed by a widow who lives there. God has told Elijah that there will be a drought and a famine on the land which will last for several years. Elijah finds the woman who has only enough flour and oil for one small meal for herself and her son. They plan to eat it and then wait for death which will surely come to them. Seems like a odd person for God to send Elijah to, doesn't it? How will she be able to help him, we cannot help but wonder.

Think of how the woman must have felt. She is in desperate straits. Her hope is all dried up and gone, she and her boy are going to die. There isn't any way they can make it. Right then, when she has finally faced facts and accepted her fate, along comes some strange man wanting to help her eat her last morsel of food. Mice eating crumbs from the floor would die in her house— there are no crumbs to be had! I like this quote from Jack London which seems to go well with this Bible story: "A bone to the dog is not charity. Charity is the bone shared with the dog, when you are just as hungry as the dog." Surely, that is the situation for the widow. She is asked to share when she seemingly has nothing to share.

Elijah tells the woman to go ahead and make the little cake of bread she had planned to make, but make a small cake for him first. He promises her that the Lord God will provide for their needs. The flour in the jar will not be used up and the oil in the jug will not run out until the Lord sends rain again to the land. And that is exactly what happens. Elijah stays with the little family and God takes care of them. The flour is not used up and the oil does not run out.

Then tragedy happens. The widow's son dies. Another weeping widow and another dead son. More grief in the need of hope and healing. For some reason, the

woman believes that Elijah is the cause for her son's death. But Elijah takes the boy from his mother's arms and carries him up to the room in which he has been staying. He lays the boy out on his bed, and calls out to God: "O LORD my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" Then he stretches himself over the boy three times while crying out to God, O LORD my God, let this boy's life return to him!" The Bible says;

"The LORD heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, "Look, your son is alive!"

Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth."

The question which I wrote in my Bible long ago at the end of that story is this: "Why didn't she know this before?" Why didn't the widow know that Elijah was truly a man of God and that he indeed spoke the word of God. He had kept them alive for some time just as God had promised. The flour and oil did not run out, and still she had her doubts. The everyday miracle which she had witnessed so many times must have become so routine that she forgot the promise of God. God would take care of them and they would not die. Perhaps, she had lived with hopelessness for so long that she just couldn't keep her faith. That is, until she saw life come out of death, until she saw her son who was dead alive again!

Friends, we live in danger of overlooking miracles– the miracles of everyday life. We go along unaware that for us the flour and oil are still there. God provides what we need for each day, even though times may be tough. But we have to trust God. The widow had to be willing to share the little food she had left, knowing it might mean her death would come even sooner, in the hope that perhaps the prophet was right– that God was right. She trusted what God had instructed through Elijah, and she and her

son were saved from hunger and supplied with their daily bread. God through Elijah raised a dead boy to life. God in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, raised a young man to life. In each case the broken heart of the widowed mother was healed and she was given hope once again. Hope that the love of God was alive in the world. Faith that the flour and oil of life would go on.

The other night in the city of Detroit— who would have thought— hope was born again. Healing was once again alive in America. The teachings of Jesus were played out right along with the game of baseball. A man once came to Jesus and said, “Have mercy on me, for I am a sinner.” His words made Jesus glad for he was humbly sorry. An umpire apologized to a young pitcher and admitted that he had made a mistake and in so doing took something special away from the younger man.

When our Lord was before his accusers and he was spat upon and cursed and wrongly condemned, the Bible tells us that he uttered not a word in his own defense. He went on with the mission for which he had been sent from heaven. A young pitcher with a nearly perfect record received a wrong call from an umpire, and that wrong call destroyed his chances to have that perfect game. Yet, he smiled, said not a word in anger or self-defense and went back to the game.

Someone asked Jesus how many times we are to forgive those who wrong us, and Jesus said “seven times seventy times.” In Detroit, a young pitcher who was wronged gave complete forgiveness and even love. And a coach applauded the one who asked to be forgiven. And the healing of the Lord Jesus Christ was witnessed among the people of our land. Friends, do you ever get discouraged, ever lose hope? Remember, your jar is always full and your jug is overflowing. That is how God provides. And just when we need hope the most, God gives us a lesson right out of the blue in the most unexpected way— like in a baseball game! Thanks be to God! Amen.

