
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

Bidden or Unbidden, God Is Present

A Sermon by

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Scripture: Luke 7:11-17

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Many years ago, far, far away in Grand Rapids, Michigan, while I was serving on the Michigan Conference staff working with an area of 72 congregations across the southern part of Michigan, Ted became the Interim Senior Pastor of Second Congregational Church, United Church of Christ. Their beloved pastor of twenty-plus years had retired, and it was time to move into a new day, a new chapter, a new future. We still keep in touch with several friends from that congregation, even twenty some years later. One of those friends is a pastor. Dick was an attorney who became a pastor, who was fired from a church, who practiced as an attorney again, became a pastor a second time until he was beat up by another church, and now lives pretty happily practicing as an attorney. Dick is an incredibly spiritual person and could be such a gift to a church.

As Ted was leaving Second Church after a two year interim, Dick gave Ted this bronze wall plaque, which says, "Bidden or Unbidden, God is Present."

The phrase probably dates back to Erasmus, a medieval scholar. Psychologist and theologian Dr. Carl Jung recaptured the phrase, and Dr. Jung had it engraved both over his door entrance and onto his tombstone. Dr. Jung was captured by the depth of its meaning for the world. God is always there, whether we ask God to be there or not.¹

Bidden or unbidden, God is present.

People do not do funeral processions much anymore these days, but recently I have been a part of two. One was in Nicaragua when Monica and I traveled to La Flor for the dedication of the community center and church. Then we traveled to Chacraseca to see their water project. La FLor is rain forest. Chacraseca is hot and dry much of year, except like now where they got devastating heavy rains from Hurricane Agatha, like you have heard about in Guatemala. When we were there, it was very hot and very dry. We witnessed a funeral procession...a simple coffin on the back of the one truck in the village, draped in flowers, and followed by hundreds of people on foot, men, women and children, a few on horses or donkeys, walking slowly behind the truck. Their procession was from the deceased's home to the church cemetery, about five miles, on a day like today, slowly...walking.

The second funeral procession was for the recent tragedy of the motorcyclists being killed. We left this sanctuary and had a motorcycle escort with hundreds of bikers, following the family to Veterans National Cemetery, where we stood proudly and in solidarity and with compassion in our common grief.

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Only Luke, the Gospel teller, describes this funeral procession. Luke tells his 'hungry for God listeners' that this man named Jesus had just healed the slave of a Roman centurion, a slave...from near death to wholeness of life, in Capernaum. The next day after that cure, Jesus, his disciples and a great crowd walked the twelve miles to Nain, near the sloping hills of Mt. Tabor and the Great Plains where battles were fought long ago at Meggido. It would have been near evening as the shadows were beginning to fall. "The time of burial was sunset and Jewish cemeteries were always situated outside the walls of their towns. The coffin was carried on the shoulders, with the face of

¹ <http://lifeisjoy.xanga.com/620979766/bidden-or-unbidden-god-is-present/>

the deceased exposed, until they came to the place of the sepulchre. There the lid was nailed on the coffin, and the funeral rites were completed.”²

As they came out of the city gates Jesus saw the widow and had compassion, saying, “Do not weep”, touched the man who had died and said, “Young man, I say to you, rise.”

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Let’s look at the scene in Nain. Who was this Jesus? What is he now? Where does his power come from? Through his power everything is radically changed.

For the pallbearers: death and everything that touches death is unclean...yet Jesus touched death. He showed the pallbearers what they must do. For the young man: though he was dead, he heard the voice of Jesus commanding him to rise. Jesus gave him back to his mother. To a Jewish mother, he was her lifeline. “The law stipulates that a firstborn son care for his widowed mother until he is thirty years of age.”³ When he died, she died. When he is arisen, her life was given back to her: her future, her life with dignity, and her place was restored within the community.

The mourners? At first seized with fear, they proclaim they have seen a prophet and they tell everyone, word spreads fast about new life and hope.

Bidden or unbidden, God is present.

Long ago and far away in a small village named Nain, God raised the dead.

I don’t know how. I don’t know why.

What I do know, however, is that God still raises the dead. Like me. Like you. Even churches. However long something has been dead, God can still raise it.

I don’t know how. I don’t know why.

I know it has happened in my life.

- Places and relationships that I thought were dead to me, too broken, too hurtful, too alienated to even try anymore, God has raised them from the dead.
- People and relationships where the funeral procession was well on its way to the cemetery, God has raised them from the dead.
- Churches which acted as if there was not enough, better hold on to what we got because there won’t be anymore, God has raised churches from the dead.

I don’t know why.

I don’t know how.

However long something has been dead, God can still raise it.

² <http://www.gracegems.org/MacDuff1/s15.htm>

³ Megan McKenna, Not Counting Women and Children, The Widow of Nain, pp. 147-168, Orbis Books.

With us. God does not swoop out and ‘poof’ “Young man, I say rise”. God raises the dead when we stop and say, “You know what? This relationship is dead. I know it. You know it. I don’t want it to be dead. Can we work this out? Can we stop? Let’s touch the place where it is dead. Let’s name it, claim it, and try to find a way together to see it rise. However long something has been dead, God can still raise it, with us.”

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None of us want to live our lives or our faith life day after day in a funeral procession. We long, like the young man’s mother and the on-looking crowd to be the ones shouting “God is looking favorably on God’s people. God is good. God has blessed us once again. Can I tell you how God has blessed me in my life? Have you heard how many times God has helped me through my struggles, through my troubles?”

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God is at work in the world in ways I cannot ever know how or why. Today we prayed that God will be at work in the life of Rohan. I believe God will be. Soon we will pray that God will be at work through ordinary grains and an ordinary cup. I believe God will be.

I believe God has been at work in the lives of people before us and in the lives of those who will come after us.

Do any of us earn baptism or earn communion? It is what we call grace. By the grace of God, God has chosen to feed us, to satisfy us with good things, like joy and hope and generosity and sharing and opportunities to start over again each day. By the grace of God, God has chosen to remind us that no matter how long something has been dead, it can be raised to new life. We can offer forgiveness. We can offer relationship. We can offer compassion. We can let go of old death, and old pain, and old behaviors. We can shout the good news that God has done amazing things and we, together with God, can be and do amazing also. God is bidding us.

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Thanks be to God. Amen.