

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, June 6, 2010
Rev. John Tapscott

"A DIVINE VISITATION"

Luke 7:11-17

Once in a while someone, after they've have been helped by a worship service here, says to me, "People don't know what they're missing." They're referring to those who are absent from worship, people on our membership rolls and in the wider community. It's funny but almost every time I've prepared a sermon with a particular person and their need in mind, that person has been absent when I've given the sermon. I trust that by God's grace someone else was in church that day who needed the message.

One time I built a friendship with a particular man who was a skeptic and a non-church goer. After I had known him for several years, he said, "I'm going to church Christmas Eve, for sure, I'll be there." I was very pleased and prepared a message that might connect with him. I knew he would enjoy the music because he was a musician himself and knew one of our soloists. Then at the Christmas Eve service as I scanned the congregation, I realized that he was not there. I felt my heart sink. He told me later that he and his lady friend had received a last-minute invitation to dinner from some friends. Sadly he never, ever made it into the church.

But that's typical isn't it - other things take priority over worship and prayer and faith and Scripture and our relationship with God. And those of us who find these things so important have to say, "People don't know what they're missing now, and what they will miss in the future." We have to fervently pray that Christ will touch what is lifeless in these dear folk and raise them up and bring them alive in faith. For Christ does that kind of work today. Christ touches what is lifeless in us and raises us up, brings us alive.

During Jesus' ministry, the people of his hometown, Nazareth, rejected him. He could do no mighty works there because of their unbelief. But just a few miles up the road in the village of Nain, Jesus did one of his greatest works. The people of Nazareth didn't know what they were missing, but the people of Nain and one family in particular were blessed. As Jesus approached the gate of the town, a dead man was being carried out on a bier, a stretcher. His body would have been wrapped in cloths. He was the only son of his mother who was a widow. It was a sad situation. The woman had suffered two grievous losses.

Israel was to look after widows and orphans but often widows became isolated and destitute. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her, and told her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier. The bearers stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. The crowd was amazed and they glorified God saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us", and "God has visited his people." The people were right. In Jesus God had indeed visited his people.

On a warm June Sunday, the last thing on your minds is the celebration of Christmas. But here in a sentence is what we proclaim at Christmas - that in Jesus of Nazareth, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, God visited his people in person. And Jesus' miracle also foreshadowed Easter. On that great morning God powerfully raised the son of the widow Mary, and God's own dear Son from the grave. In this story Christmas and Easter are combined.

God is still visiting his people and his church. The Risen Christ draws near by the power of the Holy Spirit. Today, we can trust that Christ has come here to visit us. And what he is doing for us is similar to what he did long ago at Nain. "Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" Christ is touching what is lifeless in us and raising us up, bringing us alive.

Now we are not like that young man, stretched out dead on a bier, not yet anyway. But there are places in us where we are lifeless, places where we lack vitality. Our hope may have dried up. Our love and compassion may be burning low. Our energy level is near the empty mark and the warning light has come on. Even the fires of faith may have grown dim within us. We lack confidence in God's ability to answer our prayers or make a difference.

When Rev. Dr. Leonard Griffith went to England to preach in the 1960's, he observed that British society and even the churches had become cold, even hostile to the Gospel of Christ. Recently I have seen noticed the same thing happening here. There is a deadness in peoples' souls, a real indifference to the Gospel and their need for it. And it's not just out there; it's even in the church. The rate of secularization of Canadian society and the degree to which we're severing our Christian roots is astounding. Other religions have the same issues. We think of the strength and the growth of the Muslim faith. But 80% of people who claim to be Muslim seldom participate in their faith, about the same percentage of Christians who are inactive. I told a friend the other day that not only are there are lot of Christmas and Easter Christians, but a lot of Christmas and Easter Muslims, too, if you catch my drift.

The point is that even as we are walking around in good physical health we can be dead in spirit. The church can become lifeless as well, lacking energy, vision and a sense of mission. We need to regain the sense of enthusiasm of those people in Nain and help to spread the word about Christ. If we don't find a way to effectively tell people what they're missing and why it's so important, the church, yes, our church, will die. I worry about it, but it has to be a congregational and a church wide concern. The truth is that there are lifeless places in us and in the church.

But remember our text. 'Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.' The good news is that even now Jesus Christ draws near to people and places that are dead, lifeless. Just as in the days of his flesh, such people and such places are on his visitation list. Christ touches the lifeless places in us and raises us up, brings us alive. And why not? He is the one who died for our sins, was buried and then raised by his Father to be alive forevermore. So Jesus is Lord even over death. That by the way, is why we can preach with hope at funeral services. No matter how difficult the circumstances, we know that Christ draws near with compassion and love. I trust in Christ as my Saviour and I know that on the last day, Christ will pay me a visit. He will touch my lifeless body and raise me up to everlasting life in the Father's house. He will do the same for you and for all who trust in him.

And Jesus does his work among us now, long before our physical death. He touches places that are dead and lifeless and raises up new life. Why does someone tell me that they have been blessed and strengthened and uplifted by a worship service? The reason is because in that worship time Christ touched that person and raised up new life and hope in them. That's what Christ does for you and for me. He comes to meet us here and does his work in us. Are you discouraged? Christ touches you and raises up new courage in you. Do you feel the sting of regret and sin? Christ comes and touches you with the healing balm of forgiveness and then leads you in God's way. Are you burdened and heavy laden? Christ comes and reaches out to carry your burdens with you and for you. Are you feeling weak in body and spirit? Christ comes and grants you the divine strength which enables you to do all things. Are you in despair? Do you miss a loved one? Christ touches you and raises up within you the living hope of heaven. Christ touches the lifeless places in us and raises us up, brings us alive. And he may be doing that very thing for you today, right now as you hear and trust this word.

We know it's true for the church, as well. The church often seems old and

stodgy, two or three steps behind in this fast-paced world. We see the statistics and the secularization and we wonder and we worry. But people have been planning burial services for the church for a long time. Every generation or so people declare the church to be dead. But then a power comes and raises the church up to new life and renewed mission. As Calvin put it, the story of the church is the story of many resurrections. And what happens is that Christ comes and touches the lifeless church and raises up new life and power and vitality. The Gospel goes forward with power and many souls respond with faith to the message of Christ for their salvation unto eternal life. The Body of Christ is renewed and revived.

Just last week a clergy friend of mine shared something quite exciting that is happening in churches in Great Britain, those churches that had often become little more than tourist stops. Many, including some venerable Church of England congregations, are unexpectedly undergoing a revival. They are filling with people, including many young people. You can hardly get a seat at some services. Not all churches mind you, but some of them. I know this is true because some of you have brought me bulletins and newsletters from churches you have visited in the U. K. They reveal active churches full of people hearing and responding to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus has been touching those churches and bringing them alive again. The spiritually dead are being raised to new life. Maybe we're not quite dead enough here in Canada for that to take place yet on a wide scale, but if it is happening in Britain, it will happen here too, eventually. Let us pray for it and hold firmly to the faith until it happens. And it will happen. For Jesus Christ touches the lifeless places in us and raises us up, brings us alive. He does it for the church. One day he will do it for all God's creation and make all things new. And as you receive this Holy Supper today trust that Christ is visiting you and doing his work in you, raising you up, bringing you alive.