Good morning!  Join me in wishing Donna Plummer a very happy birthday!

Last Sunday we lit the Memorial Candle for Eleanor (Punky) Adams and held her family in prayer.  Her memorial service will be at Union Church August 28.  We held Paul Kelsey and his family in prayer and Pati Crooker of Thomas Point Beach.

I am up to my elbows in sorting through the last 27 years of our lives and looking forward to being settled finally in South Bristol!  I was so pleased and honored to join the community at the Lincoln Academy Class of 2016 Baccalaureate last Wednesday when I delivered the benediction.  It is a joy to have so many friends coming back.  Lois Allen and her family including graduate, Liam; Randy Nutter; Cynthia Garrels; Avery Manchester; Penny Mardoian; Bill and Barbara Smith-we've missed you!

Yesterday the Open and Affirming Committee met.  We are formulating a statement to be voted on at Annual Meeting.

This Wednesday evening is the last of the Soup Suppers at the UCC in Newcastle and the topic will be 'White Privilege'. 6:00-8:00

Next Sunday, June 12, is 'Diaper Sunday' at Union Church!  The LincolnHealth Women's Center is collecting disposable diapers (every size) for families in our area.  Let's fill the altar!  And then we will deliver them.

May 29, 2016:

**OLD TESTAMENT**1 Kings 8:22-23, 41-43      Barbara Smith

**GOSPEL**Luke 7:1-10                                                 Sally Gundersen

**MESSAGE** Pastor Beth Hood

      There is a story from the Civil War in which a couple of young soldiers were overheard praying that if there were those in their company that must die in the coming battle, that it would be them for they knew the Lord and were prepared for eternity, and that God would be merciful to spare their comrades in arms that they might yet repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

      Such is the heart of a true Christian.

      Of all the civic holidays on our U.S. Calendar, Memorial Day may come closest to a deep embrace of spiritual values.

      Memorial Day is a sacred commemoration. The people we honor on this day are a silent witness to a virtuous honor that is particularly dear to people of spiritual values. This is the time each year when we remember men and women who have been, as is written about the Centurion, “…set under authority…” On this day we remember that some of those under authority have, as a consequence of their service, sacrificed their lives.

      To learn of the God known in Jesus Christ is to learn of a God who loves us enough to set us free. It is an unfortunate truth that because of this freedom, terrible things happen.

      This holiday reminds us of the sometimes terrible cost we pay for our freedom. Wars and rumors of wars are the long human story. That story can be one of self-sacrifice and heroism, but it is also a story of the death of the young and the maiming of the innocent.

      For countless centuries, human beings have tried to settle their differences through violence. That is a choice our freedom offers us. God could have created us in ways that prevented us from choosing violence. But to do this, God would have had to make us puppets rather than free. This is a holiday that remembers the cost that comes with our freedom to choose.

      One of the reasons God gives us the gift of freedom is because the God who loves us will not coerce our love in return, but wants it given back freely. The God who loves us invites, but does not force our love in return. Yet this is a costly freedom that leaves us at liberty to make war, drug deals, and countless other horrors. In a world so full of hurts like these, one of the things that we must always learn when we come to worship God is that God is not the author and the source of the violence and the pain of life. God is the one who loves us into freedom—even at great cost.

      We reciprocate God’s love by keeping Christ’s commandments. This is a choice our freedom offers. It is important to understand this clearly. God is not primarily interested in a mushy, syrupy love. Rather, God wants our love shown in the actions of our lives, in the ways we love God, self, and others through following Christ’s commandments.

      To love God is to use our freedom wisely. To love God is to choose the Christlike way. To love God is to imitate the deeds of Jesus. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” It is easy and cheap to claim to love God without accepting the hard tasks of keeping Christ’s commandments. Our world and our churches are full of people who want an easy love, love that makes no demands, love of feeling rather than action. A meaningful love of God is shown through a life lived in harmony with the way of Christ.

      This understanding of our use of freedom is vastly more robust than simple affection for God. It is infinitely more demanding. It recognizes we have the freedom to reject Christ’s commandments. Much of the terrible pain of the world is the result of choices to follow our own way rather than the commandments of Christ.

      Those who love God by obeying the commandments of Christ will have help. A couple of weeks ago, we spoke of Jesus sending the ‘advocate’, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.” The Holy Spirit advocates for our faithfulness to the way of Christ. When we make beginning efforts to keep Christ’s commandments, we are rewarded by further encouragement to grow in the keeping of those commandments. The Holy Spirit reinforces our least desire to follow Christ. Our free choices to love God by obeying Christ are encouraged and empowered by the Spirit’s presence, urging the choices for good.

      On this weekend when the nation honors those who have paid a terrible price for humanity’s choice to follow its own way rather than the way Christ, we are reminded of the gift of God’s love. We are reminded of God’s gift of freedom. We are reminded of the invitation to love God by obeying Christ’s commandments. We are promised that each right choice will be empowered and reinforced by the Holy Spirit. Let us love God by choosing the way of Christ.

June 5, 2016:

**HEBREW BIBLE READING**1 Kings 17:8-24

**GOSPEL READING**Luke 7:11-17

**MESSAGE**               Unlikely People in Unexpected PlacesPastor Beth Hood

      I have told you before that sometime on a Sunday afternoon or evening, I look at the lectionary for the next week. That means that no matter what I’m doing, in a good week, it is always there waiting to be jogged by something I’m doing or something I hear.

      I keep expecting that going through 27 years’ worth of stuff and memories will lead to a great sermon.

      But this week, it was as I was driving north to South Bristol for inspections on what I hope will be our new home.

      On the news I heard about a Pastor in Arizona who had written an article about three types of Christians Jesus would reject.

      Whoa! That smashes into the thoughts I was having about the lectionary. The whole point of last week’s reading about the healing of the Roman centurion’s slave; and the readings this morning of the widows’ sons is the expanding of boundaries.

      In the readings from the Gospel, there are echoes of the Old Testament. All pointing to the expansion of boundaries.

      Conventional wisdom is astonished by the encounter of the centurion and Jesus. The centurion is a gentile, yet loves Jewish tradition; the centurion represents an occupying power, yet wins the trust of the people’s leaders; the centurion exercises power over those in his command, yet cares for the life of a slave, the centurion embodies all military and political power in the area, yet turns to a poor, itinerant preacher for healing. Even Jesus is astonished at the faith of the centurion.

      When a foreign military officer asks that Jesus the prophet heal his servant, we hear echoes of another military commander long ago, another foreigner, another ‘other’, Naaman, the Aramean commander and enemy of Israel, who seeks healing from his leprosy from Elisha, the ‘man of God.’

      In all her well-known social and economic vulnerability in the ancient Middle East, few biblical characters embody the poor and oppressed more fully than the widow.

      In today’s stories, it is clear that the widows of the world are precisely whom God cares about. Elijah is sent by the Lord to a widow. Jesus is moved by a widow’s plight. Both of these prophets of God become agents of miracles, showing holy love for those who have no refuge in society.

      Just before the text of Elijah healing the Widow of Zarephath’s son, Elijah, fleeing for his life and living in exile, is sent to Zarephah where God tells him a widow will provide him with food. Ironically, this is the home region of Jezebel from whom Elijah is fleeing. It is the home of the god, Baal. It is well beyond the territory of the Israelites, God’s people.

      God commanded Elijah to seek help from “a nobody” who has nothing. The great prophet had to rely on the kindness and generosity of a stranger, a poor widow, a foreigner who, presumably, is herself a worshipper of Baal.

      This Bible is full of such irony with God at work through the most unexpected people, in the most unexpected places.

      Hearing that Elijah went to Zarephath reminds us of the story in Mark’s Gospel when Jesus went to the same area and met the Syro-Phoenician woman, another foreigner driven by love for her child who opens up the compassion and vision of Jesus to share the ‘crumbs’ of the children with ‘dogs’ or Gentiles.

      When Jesus’ hometown audience in Luke found it hard to believe that one of their own could speak so graciously, he brought up this very story, about the widow of Zarephath, and the amazing way God is at work in the most unexpected places, with the most unlikely of people.

      Some of the best stories in the Bible, the ones that remind us of other really good stories in the Bible happen in those out-of-the-way, across the border places, with people who are on the margins and yet surprisingly important in the grand scheme of things.

      The second part of our reading from 1 Kings about the raising of the widow’s son reminds us of the story in our Gospel reading today when another widow’s son is raised by Jesus. We recall too, another poor pagan widow, Ruth, also a foreigner, whose tender and unconditional care of her forlorn mother-in-law, Naomi, mirrors God’s own love and faithfulness, a love made flesh in Jesus.

      The parallels in these stories cannot be missed. The wonders performed by Elijah and Jesus indicated the presence of God among his people in Israel, even at a time when so much else in Israel was in spiritual tatters. The ability to perform miracles was a key calling card for the prophetic mission of these pivotal figures from Israel’s history.

      The miracles were foretastes of kingdom fullness, not the fullness itself. The miracles were arrows pointing a certain direction, they were not the destination that was being indicated. As C.S. Lewis once put it, only a fool confuses the highway sign for “Chicago” with the city itself.

      In the benediction, I gave to the Lincoln Academy Class of 2016 this week, I urged them to look beyond the world with things as they are to make it the world that it can be. Another way to put it is, ‘Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth.”

      Luke 7 reminds us that we can be grateful to follow a Savior with the power to raise the dead. Seeing this gives us profound hope. Jesus really is who he said he was and since this same Jesus promised us a kingdom of shalom, we can take him at his word.

      Jesus was no Oral Roberts-type who stood up in front of a camera proclaiming from a safe distance that he just knew that somewhere out there in the world at that very moment someone in Capernaum had just been delivered from arthritis and someone in Bethlehem had just been released from a demon.

      That’s not how Jesus operated. He got so close to the people who lived on the margins of society as to be defiled by them, according to the religious convention of his day. He got touched by menstruating women, he touched dead bodies, he touched ‘unholy’ lepers. These were not healings of the already well-off performed from some safe distance.

      These were quiet manifestations of God’s glory in precisely the last places on earth where the religious folk of that time thought religious folk belonged. If miracles were signs or arrows pointing us to the deeper realities of God’s kingdom, then surely one of the directions in which we get pointed in the gospels is toward our being with the very people whom others mostly avoid in order to show them that God loves them whether we can solve their every ill or not.

      These are stories about a God who gives life but also sometimes mysteriously allows death. Ultimately, however, these stories show that God’s power is on the side of life. God equips the widow to miraculously give Elijah life-giving food. And in the secrecy of an upstairs room, he also raises the dead to life.

      In a world where AIDS threatens to obliterate a continent’s entire generation and throttle its succeeding generations, this is gospel indeed. In a world where cancer and other potentially fatal diseases seem to lurk all around us, this is gospel indeed.

      In that context of great death, the news that Yahweh is God and on the side of life is pure gospel. It gives God’s people the courage to face the Ahab’s and Baal’s of our own time and to battle them in potentially mortal combat.

      After all, we have Jesus Christ, who becomes the focus of God’s desire for life. Yet he seems no more likely a candidate to deliver life than a destitute widow or hungry prophet. Yet in his ministry Jesus Christ offered life in the midst of death by providing food, healing the sick and raising the dead. There may be three types of Christians who reject Jesus, but the stories we read don’t give any sense that Jesus would reject anyone.