

The readings today tell us about God's power to bring back people from the dead. Read at the most general level, they speak of God's power and willingness throughout history to restore all of humankind to life.

Applying that message to your day-to-day life and mine presents a daunting challenge. If we're to follow Jesus and do what he did, then apparently that repertoire needs to include bringing people back from the dead. Although our medical folks do that routinely, the rest of us might have trouble recalling the last time we did that. Perhaps we need to take a broader look at the message in the readings to figure out in what practical ways it might apply to us.

Let's do that. Looking at the situations described in both the first reading and the gospel it's pretty clear that both of the two women were in desperate situations. Their only source of support had just perished and the future looked grim. In both cases God, acting through human beings – Elijah and Jesus – manifested the depth of his love and compassion by bringing the women's sons back to life.

If the broader message is at root all about love and compassion, then for us to follow Jesus with fidelity means simply that we need to allow God to work through us the way God did through Jesus and Elijah.

Resuscitations of one kind or another are actually not beyond the realm of possibility for mere mortals like you and me, for it is all too possible, as the poet W.H. Auden pointed out years ago, for people to lose their human dignity and die as men and women before their bodies die.* Sadly, there are so many ways in which a death like that can happen to someone. To be the agent through whom God brings such folks back to life is part of your mission and mine as Christians, and it's every bit as good as resuscitating a corpse.

* <https://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/users/99/jrieffel/poetry/auden/achilles.html>, May 30, 2016

Sometimes as we do that, we're not even aware we're doing anything of the sort. This is perfectly OK, because it's really God's work through us anyway, not anything we manage to do on our own. Let me tell you a story or two about that.

A few years ago, while I was serving as a deacon over at St. Pat's in Collinsville, a man came up to the pastor and me after mass one morning and asked if he could speak with us. The answer to that question's always "Yes," so he reached into his coat pocket and took out two large checks – one for the parish which he gave to the pastor and another for the parish's Haiti Ministry, which I led at the time.

We thanked him profusely, but he just held up his hand and shook his head. "You don't understand," he said, "You two guys saved my life." Then he turned and walked away, saying nothing more. I looked at the astonished pastor and he looked back at an equally astonished me. We asked each other the obvious questions, but both of us ended up just shrugging our shoulders and shaking our heads. God had done something enormously significant for him through us, but neither of us had a clue what it might've been.

Sometimes we do know. I was working at Hartford Hospital several years ago and came across a man who was about to donate a kidney to his sister. It was her only chance, he told me. As he continued to share how he felt, he admitted that he was afraid, but determined to go ahead with it. "Sometimes," he told me, "love is more important than life." He knew exactly what he was doing and was willing, out of love for his sister, to put his own life on the line so that she could come back from the dead.

Imminent death, or high drama don't need to figure in our efforts to save life. A friend of mine and I were exchanging stories about our marriages not too long ago. One morning, he told me, he woke up, looked unemotionally at his wife, stared blankly at the room around them and contemplated another tedious day at the office.

He remembered thinking “Is this all there is?” Somehow over the years the joy had gone out of their marriage. It had turned into a sullen, loveless routine. Intimate conversation had evaporated. “I felt the marriage was dead, Tim,” he told me, “and I felt as if any part of me that had ever loved was dead, too.”

In desperation, he told me he prayed and sensed a response from God that sounded something like: “I hear you - follow me.” He said he had no idea what that might have meant, but that evening he felt an urge to bring home some flowers, so he did. His wife was taken by surprise. It had been years since he had brought her flowers. “What have you done?” she growled. “Nothing,” he replied, “just thought you might like them.” Every day the urge was different. One day it was to put a cookie on her pillow. Another day it was a book. He winced and told me, “I even sat down one night and watched ‘Dancing with the Stars’ with her.”

Not much later came the day he found a friendly note in his sock drawer. Dinner was actually warm that night, and they enjoyed it together, by candlelight. Eventually, little gesture by little gesture, life came back into their marriage. Criticism, contempt and avoidance gradually vanished as they chose to give their energy to understanding, compliments and warmth instead. He sensed that things were getting better, but the clincher, he said, was the day she turned to him and “Thanks for doing what you’re doing. Before I felt dead, but now I’m alive.” He knew it was true for him, too, for sometimes the life you resuscitate turns out to be your own.

I suspect something similar to these stories happens in everyone’s life, sooner or later. Some of us bring back the dead by a medical procedure, sometimes it’s just simple affirmation that does the trick, sometimes it’s prayer, other times it’s something else. All the time it’s God, expressing love and compassion to his people through his people, always, through that love, bringing people back to life who otherwise would be dead.