

He Had Compassion

Luke 7:11-17

The strangest things happen at funerals. Family stories and the sharing of cherished memories generate both deep laughter and inconsolable tears. In this second story of God's graciousness from Luke 7, Jesus raised from death the son of a widow at Nain. When the heart of this mother was split with grief, Jesus walked in through the gap.

As the story goes, Jesus was taking a road trip when this event took place. After healing the slave of a centurion at Capernaum, Jesus traveled on with his disciples and a large crowd to the town of Nain. The road was apparently crowded by a funeral procession as friends of the family held a widow's son aloft on his bier. As the grief-stricken procession passed nearby, we can imagine Jesus reaching out his hand in compassion for the mother.

"Jesus said to her, 'Do not weep.' Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!' (Luke 7:13-14). What followed was a deeply compassionate response to suffering both seen and hidden. We see the suffering of a woman at the loss of her son. What we do not see is the suffering of a widow who has lost everything. It is to this deeper suffering that Jesus spoke.

Once again Jesus crossed the line in his act of compassion. What appears to us to be empathetic and generous would have been perceived as unrighteous behavior. For a male Jew, the body of the dead was considered unclean, and Jesus would have been forbidden to touch it. His response to an unprotected widow would have been equally suspect.

Widows held a tenuous position in Jesus' day. They were often linked with orphans as those without provision in Jewish society. Women lived under the protection of their father's household, and then of their husband's household. After the death of a husband, it was customary for the brother or other relative of the deceased to marry the widow. In cases where no male relative from the family of her husband was available, the widow moved to the margins of society and fell vulnerable to alienation and exclusion from the community and the simple daily provision of familial care. Further, the death of an only son would leave a widow without an heir and therefore unable to retain whatever means remained for her. Without an heir, all personal property reverted to the husband's family after his death.

Jesus' act of compassion demonstrated two things about the nature of God. First, Jesus served as a justice-making witness to the provision of God that is available to all. Jesus demonstrates once again God's regard for those at the margins. It is easy for us to forget the risks Jesus took to demonstrate the kingdom of God on earth. Notice that his compassion was extended to the mother who lived, not to the son who had died. Jesus was compassionate toward her for her sake. He transformed her mourning to joy, her desolation to hope.

Second, Jesus was willing to risk rebuke for exercising God's special mercy for the least among society. His mercy toward the widow was a foretaste of the compassion he felt toward his own mother from the cross. We read that "when Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home" (John 19:26-27).

We love Jesus for his compassion. He noticed and responded to those at the fringes, who often live unseen. Most people would have stood respectfully by the

side of the road as the funeral procession passed by, avoiding eye contact, perhaps murmuring quietly to one another or discussing the circumstances of the death. Jesus saw people as God sees them and responded to them as God responds to us.

At first we may not readily identify with the widow's circumstance. Women living in contemporary Western culture seldom experience the vulnerability of this widow who depended upon male protection to survive. Yet for many women throughout the world, similar mores remain. Whatever our social context, we can imagine the multilayered suffering triggered by this woman's loss.

While we may not have experienced the social and economic vulnerability of women in the first and second centuries, we do know the bereavement of a parent for a lost child. There is perhaps nothing this side of heaven more difficult to bear. At such a time, what we would not give to have the lost child restored to us. What we would not sacrifice to have Jesus walk into our grief and restore the dead to life.

Such compassion is almost too much to bear. Those who witnessed such an event during Jesus' ministry were seized with fear. They sensed divine presence and were undone by it. We watch detective television dramas about missing persons and pray over the faces of children on milk cartons, longing for that day and hour when our own broken lives will be restored. **Verlee A. Copeland**

Who among us has not prayed for a miracle at some point in our lives? Who has not called out in challenge to all things faithful that a compassionate God would not make us suffer so? In these moments, miracles seem to be a sign that God is working to set things right in a world gone very wrong. Illness, death, financial ruin, chronic pain, divorce, depression, addiction, injured children, violence and abuse, mass trauma—the list is long of life circumstances that seem to dismantle our assumptions of the world as it should be.

Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts, proposes a frame for understanding traumatic experience, that is, for why we human creatures are so upended when tragedy strikes us. We live, she says, with certain core assumptions about the world, that is, that the world is benevolent (bad things will not happen) and meaningful (events of the world should make sense), and that the self is worthy (events in our world correlate to the good or bad that we bring into the world). At first glance most of us might argue that we are certainly smart enough to know that the world is not fair and that sometimes tragedy follows no line of reasoning. Yet in that moment when our world comes crashing in around us, very often one of the first questions to rise from our lips is, how could this happen? Or why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this? These questions imply the very assumptions Janoff-Bulman suggests.

As people of faith, we go one step further, to ask where God is in the chaos that threatens us. Underlying Janoff-Bulman's assumptions are terrifying questions like, what would it mean if we no longer lived in a trustworthy world? What would it mean if events in our lives are random (without meaning)? If we assume a correlation between good behavior and good outcome, what would it mean if we have no control over the events of our lives? When all attempts to make right sense of the senseless prove futile, we turn to God to find meaning. Miracles are among the first signs to which we look for proof that God's compassion will bring our world back into alignment.

Amazingly, like the widowed mother in our story, sometimes we actually get the grand miracle we pray for. The father or husband whose heart stops on the operating table is brought back from the clutches of death. The mother of two young children beats the odds and survives the cancer that all doctors said would kill her. More often than not, in spite of doing everything right and praying for

every good thing, the sixteen-year-old who just got her license still dies when the car she is driving hits a tree. Where is God's compassion then?

We cannot stop ourselves from praying for even the most impossible of miracles, especially when it concerns the lives of those we love. We cling to a central message of the gospel: in Christ Jesus all things are possible. In reality our lives, like that of Jesus, are filled with messy unfinished edges, not the nice tidy ending that the widowed mother in our story experiences. We must come to recognize miracles that come in other less dazzling forms. Indeed, when we focus on only one vision of what is possible, we become blinded to the many moments in which God's compassion reaches into our lives to hear, touch, and stand in the chaos of life, helping us to find new meaning even in the greatest tragedy. Jesus can hear the cries hidden in the deepest crevices of our despair, just as he heard the heart of the grieving widow. He touches us in the place of our greatest pain, just as he reached into the place of death upon the funeral bier. Jesus steps into the chaos of our unpredictable, overturned, or shattered world to bring meaning from even the most desolate suffering. **M. Jan Holton**

We live in the quiet gap between the sorrow that seems as if it will last a lifetime and God's promise of joy in the morning. God knows what it means to lose a son. Jesus raised up the son of the widow at Nain as God raised up Jesus from the cross, for our sake, reaching out his hand in compassion for us all. **Verlee A. Copeland** My brothers and sisters, God continues to have compassion for us. He hears and answers prayer. Maybe not the ways that we envision them, but in ways that bring us healing and wholeness.

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