

Jesus Cares

Luke 7:11-17

This is a difficult text for most of us to relate to. In tragic times we long for Jesus to show compassion and provide the grand miracle that will take away our despair. We cling to the vision that miracles should be like those in the New Testament.

Imagine the scene. Jesus is walking toward the town gate, with his entourage only steps behind. Perhaps he can hear the weeping long before he can see the funeral procession. There is no mistaking the sound pouring out from a mother who has lost her child. It makes little difference that this child appears to be grown; the grief is deep. The gut-wrenching wail of the widow whose only son has just died that rips into Jesus' heart, moving him to reach out with compassion. "Do not weep," he says. Unlike other miracle stories, no one rushes to the front of the crowd asking for Jesus' help. Everyone thought it was too late; after all, the young man was already dead. With a simple gesture Jesus reached out, he touched the death bier, and life grabbed hold of the body that lie upon it. "Rise up," he said to the young man. Then "Jesus gave him to his mother." The woman's shattered world was made whole again. Those who witnessed this moment were stunned and afraid as the extraordinary nature of what has happened began to sink in.

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, says “We live 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). 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? As people of faith, we ask where God is in the chaos that threatens us. 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. But, 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)**

As usual we are dropped into the middle of a story. Earlier in Luke, Jesus preached the Sermon on the Plain, fulfilling his promise to "bring good news to the poor" (4:18; 6:17-49, esp. v. 20). In this story, Jesus raises the dead, performing wonders like the prophets of old (cf. 4:25-27; 9:19).

Luke uses this narrative to certify Jesus' status as *a healer and a prophet through whom God is visiting the people* (v. 16). Jesus does not cast out demons, heal illnesses, or resuscitate the dead by the power of Beelzebul, but by the power of the Spirit of God (cf. 11:14-28; 1:35; 3:22; 4:1, 14, 18). Jesus' raising of the widow's son at Nain calls our minds to Elijah's raising of the widow's son at Zarephath (1 Kgs. 17:10, 17-24; cf. Luke 4:24-28; 7:39; 13:33; and 24:19).

The prophet of God is *one filled with compassion for those who suffer*. When Jesus came upon the widow as her son's bier leaving the city's gate, she was sobbing. She was surrounded by crowds, both from her funeral procession and from those following Jesus. Maybe she did not even see Jesus. She did not ask for anything, but the text says that "the Lord saw her" (v. 13). Since she had already lost her husband, this son was her entire family, as well as her only means of economic support. She also carried the grief of any parent who buries a child. In this scene, Jesus took the initiative, and his whole attention was on the woman.

When he saw her, he felt "compassion" for her (*splanchnizomai*, v. 13), an intense inner emotion and sympathy that accompanies mercy. This scene reveals Jesus' compassionate character and intent toward us. He meets our needs, even when we are too torn apart to ask for help.

For Luke, compassion leads to action. If compassion meant merely inner sympathy, Jesus' statement to the widow, "Do not weep," would not seem kind. Jesus did not just have empathy but the power to change the situation. He was and is the prophet of God who is *filled with the divine power over life and death*. Jesus' word also has the power to raise the dead. This resuscitation displays the authority and power of the reign of God over death itself (cf. Luke 12:5). Jesus possessed and possesses power in himself. For Jesus it sufficed to touch the bier. Luke tells us that Jesus did not have to touch the young man to demonstrate his divine, life-giving power, only speak: his command to the son, "Be raised!" from the dead. His success was instantaneous and effortless.

Filled with the divine power of life, Jesus is not only a prophet or healer, but the one like Moses (3:16; 4:34; 5:32; 7:27; cf. Deut. 18:15, 18). Jesus, the healing Messiah, did not and does not avoid difficult situations. He brings in the new order of God's reign, in which the dead are raised, the broken healed, and the poor blessed. Jesus is "great" and "the Lord," and his work is God's personal action and will (7:13, 16).

As the prophet, Jesus not only revealed his own character and intentions toward humanity, but also God's. Besides the miracle, there are three amazing things about this story. First, for those of us in a Hellenistic and Roman culture in which being moved by another was a sign of weakness, here that supposed "weakness" is associated with Jesus and, through him, with God. Compassion and mercy are the characteristics of God and of the new communal life in the Spirit in the church (6:36).

Second, Jesus as savior was and is determined to forgive sins that break community, Jesus is equally concerned with suffering. Jesus acted to reverse the tragic death of this young man. He did not ask the widow about her sins or those of her son. He simply had compassion and acted to counter it. God's salvation includes the redeeming of relations torn by suffering and death.

Third, this scripture describes a meeting between a parade of life (Jesus and his disciples) and a parade of death (the dead man, his mother, and the grieving crowd). What transpired revealed the reign of God in which the Spirit, indwelling Jesus and sent by God, transformed mortal existence into new life. (**Gregory Anderson Love**)

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.

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.

Jesus wanted to extend compassion toward the others in the crowd as he extended mercy toward the widow. The good news is Jesus brings comfort when he reaches out to touch our grief. What is the act of compassion we are waiting to receive?

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 loved one. Jesus raised up the son of the widow at Nain as God raised up Jesus from the tomb, for our sake, reaching out his hand in compassion for us all. As we pray for great miracles, don't miss the smaller miracle moments in which God's compassion enters in our upside-down world, touches our most pain-filled places, and restore our shattered hearts. (**Verlee A. Copeland**)

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).