

The Heart of the Healer

Luke 7:11-17

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on June 5, 2016]

I

Have you ever noticed that Jesus never performed any funerals?

Ministers are used to doing funerals—I consider myself something of an expert on this, having officiated 500 or more of them during my 36 years of ministry.

It is one of the most important tasks a minister is called on to do.

Yet read through all four gospels—

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—

and you will not find a single account of Jesus preaching a funeral.

But you will find several accounts of Jesus interrupting funerals by bringing the dead person back to life.

The three synoptic gospels—

Matthew, Mark, and Luke—

record the raising of the synagogue leader Jairus' daughter.

(Matt. 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43; Luke 8:40-56)

John 11 has the most dramatic resurrection story,

the raising of Lazarus,

who had been dead and buried four days.

And here in Luke's gospel alone, we have the account of Jesus restoring life to the son of the widow of Nain.

No...Jesus did not officiate funerals,
but he sure did make a habit of interrupting them.

II

So this morning I would like you to picture yourself walking in the crowd as the funeral procession winds its way to the place of burial.

It's a hot day in Galilee.

The bright sunshine glistens on the tears which are streaming down everyone's faces.

Death is common enough, that everyone knows what to do,
what their role is,
what part to play
in the drama of a Middle-Eastern funeral procession.

The professional mourners are there,
making plenty of noise so that friends and relatives,
and particularly the poor mother,
can cry their hearts out without the embarrassment of making a scene all by themselves.

(In some ways this is a much kinder approach than the detached solemnity of our modern funerals.)

The pallbearers carry the body of the young man in a long wicker basket covered by a burial shroud.

Other friends bring spices to anoint the body,
ready to wrap them in the grave-clothes to offset
the smell of death's decay.

Ancient Jewish funeral practice declared that the dead were to be buried outside the city, usually on the day of death or early the next day.

Embalming was not practiced.

You make your way from the family home,
through the village streets,
to the town gate.

The family burial plot will be a short ways outside the town—
the woman's husband was buried there sometime before.

Now his bones,
gathered with care and devotion,
lie stored in an ossuary,
a bone box,

And the body of the dead son will be carefully and loving laid in the tomb.

This death is made even more tragic by the fact that this was “the only son of his mother.”

This meant the bereaved mother now faces double jeopardy.

She had been a widow and now she is childless.

As if her fragile life weren't hard enough,
now she will fall to the bottom of the economic scale
of protection and provision.

All she has to live for and to live by is gone.

And I can't help but wonder: how did her son die?

When we think of all the ways mothers lose their sons in our world,
we can imagine some horrific possibilities.

Was he the victim of gang violence like happens all too frequently in cities
like Chicago, where last weekend sixty-four people were shot, six fatally?

Was he shot to death by a police officer after a routine traffic stop?

Was he taken away by ISIS to be tortured and beheaded?

Did he die as a result of the great plague of our time—
an overdose of heroin?

Or...did he die before his time in the service of our nation?

Whatever the tragic circumstances that brought about his untimely death,
this mother now faces the prospect of life with no one to provide for her or
protect her.

And so the “large crowd” that accompanies her on the procession to the grave site
is indicative of the depth of her tragedy.

III

Then picture, if you will, from the opposite direction—
Jesus...and a large crowd approaching the city gate.

Luke uses the same Greek word to describe both the crowd that makes up the
funeral procession and the crowd that follows Jesus.

But the difference between these two processions could not be more striking.

In the first procession you can feel the sadness...
the grief...

you can hear the sound of weeping,

as the entire village shares in the grief of the woman's loss.

A death in a small Middle-Eastern community touches everyone.

In the second procession, there is a sense of joy...

excitement...

anticipation...

of being with Jesus and listening to his teachings.

So when these two crowds meet and Jesus encounters the widow,

Luke tells us that **"his heart went out to her."**

It was a moment of spontaneous compassion.

No one asks him to do anything.

No emissaries come to request healing for someone,
as in last week's account of the centurion's servant
being healed by Jesus.

But the sights and sounds are too much for Jesus.

Moved to compassion, he interrupts the funeral procession and tells the grieving mother, "Do not weep."

He then touches the bier,

raises the young man to life,

and gives him back to his mother.

In this moment of deep love and compassion,

we glimpse the heart of Jesus,

the Heart of the Healer.

Unlike last week's story, where the centurion requests healing for his slave,

Jesus responds with compassion not to a request,

but to the need of the moment.

Just like Elijah of old,
 who in our Old Testament reading brings the son of the widow of Zarephath
 back to life,
 so Jesus brings the widow of Nain's son back to life.

He gives her back her son.

In so doing, he gives her back her life.

IV

I still remember 45 years ago,
 when I first took NT Greek,
 learning the Greek verb, "to have compassion"—
splanchnizomai.

This verb occurs a dozen times in the New Testament,
 always in the gospels.

The verb form comes from the noun *splanchnon*, meaning bowels, heart, lungs,
 liver or kidneys,
 i.e., your inward parts,
 which in that day were believed to be the center of human emotions.

To have compassion on someone is to feel it deeply in your gut.

The word *splanchnizomai* suggests the churning of the entrails or a turning of the
 womb.

In Hebrew, *compassion* and *womb* are from the same root.

It would not be too much of a stretch to say that compassion is womb love.

It is seeing another person as though he or she were your sibling,
 born from the same womb.

In a Jewish folk tale, a rabbi is asked by his students how to recognize the moment
 when night ends and the day begins.

“Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a dog from a sheep?” one student asked.

“No,” said the rabbi.

“Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a date palm from a fig tree?” asked another student.

“No,” said the rabbi.

“Then when is it?” the students asked.

“It is when you look into the face of any human creature and see your brother or your sister there. Until then, night is still with us.”

Throughout the gospels Jesus is a man of compassion.

As he walked through the villages and saw the crowds afflicted with sickness and disease, "he had compassion on them."

When he saw the hungry,
 "he had compassion on them,"
 and fed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish.

When thronged by another "large crowd" of the lame, the blind, the crippled, and the mute, he told his disciples,

"I have compassion for these people, for they are like sheep without a shepherd."

And when he left Jericho followed by yet another "large crowd"
 and two blind beggars screamed for help,
 "Jesus had compassion on them" and healed them.

The two most famous parables in the Bible are about compassion.

In contrast to the insider religious professionals, who passed by without stopping to help the man beaten by thugs along the Jericho Road,

the outsider Good Samaritan "had compassion" on him,
doctored his wounds,
and took him to an inn where he could recover.

And while the prodigal son "was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him," and welcomed him back into the family.

Compassion is expressed both in words and in actions.

We see this over and over in Luke's gospel.

The family of God includes outsiders—
those there because of accidents of birth,
like the Roman centurion and his ailing servant;

those there because of the circumstances of their lives—
like this grieving widow;

even those there because of choices they have made—
like the thief on the cross next to Jesus.

They all belong to the reign of God that Jesus ushers in.

Compassion doesn't give up but keeps translating and retranslating the message until all can hear in their own language and know that they belong.

V

Brothers and sisters, our world is experiencing a deficit of compassion and empathy for others.

As all of you know, last Saturday at the Cincinnati Zoo, a young boy, three years of age, managed to get away from his mother long enough to crawl through the barrier and fall into the gorilla habitat, where he encountered a 400 pound male gorilla named Harambe.

After about 10 agonizing minutes, during which Harambe alternated between standing over the boy and dragging him from one end of the enclosure to the other,

Zoo officials made the difficult decision to shoot and kill Harambe in order to ensure that no further harm came to the child.

The resulting expression of sadness and grief over the death of the gorilla was **only exceeded** by the outcry of criticism and condemnation of the mother on social media.

A Change.org petition calling for the boy's parents to be "held accountable for the lack of supervision and negligence that caused Harambe to lose his life" had received nearly 500,000 signatures, as of yesterday.

The mother of the child received death threats,
protestors outside the zoo called for measures to "keep brats out of habitats,"
and a well-known comedian tweeted,
"It seems that some gorillas make better parents than some
people."

And yet all of us who have ever been parents of a three-year-old know you cannot possibly keep your eye on that child every moment of every day.

There is no parent alive who has never had his or her attention diverted away from his or her child for even a moment.

Where is the compassion for this child and his mother,
who is no doubt suffering greatly because of all the attention and backlash?

And where is the gratitude that the even greater tragedy of this child being seriously injured or even killed was avoided?

Our culture needs to rediscover the meaning of compassion.

This week *Time* magazine had an excerpt from a new book by educational psychologist Michele Borba,
Unselfie: Why Empathetic kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World.

She suggests that America is suffering from a serious empathy deficit that she calls the "Selfie Syndrome."

Thanks to the rise of social media and changes in our culture and parenting styles, today's children are more self-absorbed than ever,
and this has given rise to a culture of bullying, cheating, and unhappiness.

We need to make cultivating empathy and compassion a priority, she says, both at home and at school.

VI

As Christians following the example of our Lord,
we should lead the way in such efforts.

After all, we are supposed to be the compassionate people.

Instead, we are too often viewed as narrow and judgmental.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life surveyed the cohort known as Millennials, young adults born in the years 1981-1996.

The survey showed that this group is less likely to belong to a church or synagogue than any other age group.

Thirty-five percent are religiously unaffiliated and over twenty-five percent list "atheist," "agnostic," or "nothing in particular" when it comes to religious beliefs.

When these young people were asked for the words that describe their feelings about Christians,
do you know what words are most often cited?

According to research done by the Barna Group, young adults view Christians as:
judgmental,
hypocritical,
anti-homosexual,
too political,
insensitive...
and boring.

Ouch!

As the authors of the Barna study wrote,

"Many of those outside of Christianity...reject Jesus because they feel rejected by Christians."

And yet if you read the four gospels, you find Jesus never rejected anyone.

He was anything but judgmental and he never could be accused of being anti-gay since he never said anything about it.

Instead, what we find is Jesus approached everyone with a heart of compassion.

Only as we let ourselves be filled with his compassion can we reach out in love, acceptance, and welcome to those outside the church.

Psalm 146 reminds us that there are millions of people in our world who need compassion and care —

the oppressed,
 the hungry,
 prisoners,
 the blind and deaf,
 those who are bowed down,
 the foreigner,
 the fatherless,
 and the widow.

And, in all likelihood, our next door neighbors.

The Jewish philosopher Philo said,

"Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle."

VII

A prominent businessman was walking down the street of a large city at night on his way home from a meeting.

Since his meeting had lasted later than it should, it was long after it was safe to be on the streets alone.

By this time, there were all kinds of derelicts and people of questionable reputation on the streets.

As he was walking along, the businessman happened to look down and see a man all curled up in the gutter trying to stay warm.

The night air was getting colder and colder.

Something about this man made the businessman take another look at him, and then another.

Finally, he walked over to get a good look.

When he saw the man, and the look in his eyes, the businessman instinctively did what Jesus did with the widow who had lost her only son that day in the town of Nain.

The businessman's heart went out to the man in the gutter.

He bent down to him and said, "Whoever you are, you don't belong here!"

The businessman took the man home with him to see if he could help him. As it turned out, the businessman was right.

This man didn't belong there—he was a prominent physician who had taken to drink and had all but ruined his career.

Just as Jesus saw that the young man did not belong on the funeral bier, so the businessman saw that this man, whoever he was, did not belong in the gutter.

This story also has a happy ending.

The businessman saw to it that the man got into a rehabilitation program and turned his life around.

All because of that little word "compassion."

**Compassion makes all the difference,
especially when it comes from the heart of Jesus!**

Amen.

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