

Pentecost III – Proper 5 – June 5, 2016

1Kings 17:8-16(17-24)

Psalm 146

Galatians 1:11-24

Luke 7:11-17

Gut Instincts

A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Port Townsend, WA.

It is quite a scene as the two groups move towards each other. Jesus and his disciples are accompanied by a large crowd as they approach the town of Nain. As the group was nearing gate of the town they encounter another large group coming towards them. It was a funeral procession that was heading out of town to the place of burial which might likely have been a cave in the hills. Ancient funeral processions were spectacles, events. Even poor families would be expected to hire flute players and wailing women to accompany the procession. The body would be carried on a bier, a wooden stretcher that supported the body as it was carried overhead by pall bearers. In those days burials were a cultural, community event.

I hear the sounds of the dead man's the mother weeping as she walked behind her son's body... weeping as she is being carried along by the movement of the procession. In despair, the woman wept for the loss of her son, but not only for loss of a child, but for the loss of her only child. We hear that she was already a widow. The woman had lost her husband, her son was dead, and now there was no one to help support and care for her. In the very depths of her grief the unnamed widow was facing the prospect of total destitution. In the ancient world there were no life insurance policies, no social security, no IRAs, no savings accounts. Women could not own property. A widow, with no living children, was on her own. What options did she have for food, clothing and shelter? Begging? Prostitution? I cannot begin to imagine what it must have been like for the woman... as her entire world... any sense of stability or hope for the future... was shattered, the shards of her broken world scattered amidst an ocean of grief. It is at this moment that the widow encounters Jesus.

When Jesus sees the woman we hear that he has "compassion." His heart went out to the widow. Jesus must have really seen her. As marginalized as she may have been, he saw and he understood the situation of this unnamed woman. He says to her, "Do not weep." This is not the pastoral response to a grieving person that I learned in my pastoral care training as tears can be cleansing and healing. Tears are an important part of the grieving process. But we are talking about Jesus, so we will give him a pass. He has something else in the works. Jesus then comes forward and touches the funeral bier, an act of defilement for a religious man. All stood still. Jesus then says to the dead man, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" And the man sat up, began to speak, and was given back to his mother. We are not told what the young man said, we can only imagine, but I would like to think that it was clear and coherent words of a son to his mother. I can well envision the fear that seized the two large groups that were standing at the gate of the city of Nain having just witnessed a miracle of resurrection. The fear soon shifted and the people glorified God by saying, "A great prophet as risen among us!" Some translate the line as "A great prophet has visited us." ...as in God has visited in the person of the prophet... and God visits sometimes for judgment and other times for compassionate presence. "And word about Jesus spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country."

This is a story of healing and compassion. But who is the focus of the healing? Clearly the young man comes back to life. But object of Jesus' act of compassion and healing is directed to widow, the marginalized one, who had her future and her well-being restored. Jesus is moved by a feeling in his gut, a line-crossing touch of a corpse's bier, and a few simple words. What Jesus does not do is demand anything of the woman... no statement of faith, no promise, no action at all. Jesus was moved to action by the encounter with the widow. He did not need to reach for any ideas, or theories. He didn't need to make any ethical determinations based in logic. He cared and he acted, and not one, but two lives were restored. The translation from Eugene Peterson's version of Luke's text in "The Message" says that the people who witnessed this act "all realized they were in a place of holy mystery, that God was at work among them."

We have heard that the word "compassion" means "suffering with. In Greek, the word "compassion" is associated with intestines, or bowels. In the ancient world the gut was the seat of emotions. Jesus' compassion for the widow is at the center of the story. Very importantly, Jesus sees her, he engages her and he speaks to her... Jesus sees, especially, the most marginalized... This is the holy ground on which we are being shown God at work. Compassion is not a mere feeling, but a force that motivates and compels us act to help alleviate the suffering of another. And compassion, not creeds, are at the very center of our faith and the faith of all of the major faith traditions. For us, Jesus the Christ is the living model and teacher of compassion ... a living presence and example of all that it means to care beyond our small selves. Jesus lived compassion so deeply that it took him all of the way to the cross and beyond.

Compassion, at the heart of most of the world's religions, is readily identifiable in the form of the Golden Rule. It is so very important for children to learn the simple rule, "Treat others as you would like to be treated." I have never found this standard for life and relationships to fail, even if we aren't treated well in return. When we live by this rule, with integrity, we are walking in God's ways. Sometimes the rule is written, "Do not treat others in ways that you would not want others to treat others to treat you." The rule brings us to the place where compassion and caring is invited into the relationship be it family, friends or strangers.

Krista Tippett, host of the podcast OnBeing, gave a TED talk entitled "Reconnecting with Compassion"¹ in which she says, "compassion is kind, it is a most edifying form of instant gratification...it is a simple act of presence, practical generosity, hospitality, beauty, a willingness to see beauty in the other..." Compassion is not just trying to find out what is needed, respond to the need, and then to be done with the situation. Computers and algorithms, and robots can carry simple assessments and actions. Human compassion is deeper. Mother Teresa, an icon of compassion, would gather up the dying from the gutters of Calcutta and bring them to a place of caring where their sores would be cleaned and wrapped, a place where they would have a place to rest as they lived out their last days... or hours... with dignity. As one man said of Mother Theresa, "I lived my life as a beggar, I die in the arms of an angel." That is a picture of compassion... and it is a story of healing, even in the midst of death.

For people of faith, compassion brings us to a place of mystery. For me, more important that all of the teachings of Christ, is his life and witness... and even more important is Christ's living presence with us here and now. Our faith is passed on through stories such as the ones we have heard today. But we do not live our faith simply because the stories tell us to do so. We live our faith because we experience God in the meeting place, not of pity, but of true compassion. Karen Armstrong, the ex-nun and scholar of religions, won the TED prize a few years back for her "Charter for Compassion",² focused on the Golden Rule, in which she sought to

¹ http://www.ted.com/talks/krista_tippett_reconnecting_with_compassion

² http://www.ted.com/talks/karen_armstrong_let_s_revive_the_golden_rule

http://www.ted.com/talks/karen_armstrong_makes_her_ted_prize_wish_the_charter_for_compassion

enliven a movement that would build connections and bridge faith traditions... Karen often tells the story of Rabbi Hillel who lived in the century preceding Jesus' birth. A pagan came to the rabbi and offered to convert to Judaism if the rabbi could recite the whole of Jewish teaching while he stood on one leg. Hillel stood on one leg and said, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and study it." Karen believes that compassion can be developed, and must be practiced like dancing. To grow in compassion one "must do it and practice diligently day by day"

In Krista Tippet's words, compassion is "spiritual technology." The Dalai Lama has said, "compassion is a necessity, not a luxury." "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion." In our Christian tradition Jesus shows us what compassion looks like and invites us to be in relationship with each other in ways that sometimes challenge us to move to the edges of our comfort zones, to dare to care and act amidst fears that we might look foolish, or fail in some way. We are invited to step into a place of our own vulnerability, to meet the vulnerability of another of God's beloved ...and to be bold in our caring. To be compassionate is to meet on holy ground.

I would like to end with another story about a grieving widow. It is a folktale that comes from the Jewish tradition but speaks to me of Christ's call to become schooled on the topic of compassion.



Once a widow's son died in a tragic accident. The woman, crazy with grief, mourned her loss so deeply that no one could provide her with comfort. At last a friend took her to the house of a holy man where she made a sobbing plea. "Use your powers to bring my son back to life. Surely you are able, by prayer or some magic, to induce the Almighty to lighten my grief."

The old man spoke kindly to the woman, "Bring me a mustard seed from a home that has never known sorrow. I will use that seed to remove the pain from your life."

Immediately the woman set out in search of the magic mustard seed. "First I will visit the home of a wealthy family," she thought. "Tragedy is less likely to strike them." Soon she approached a beautiful mansion, knocked on the door, and spoke to the woman who greeted her. "I am in search of a home that has never known sorrow. Is this such a place? Please, it is vital that I know."

"Never known sorrow!" cried the woman who answered the door. "You have come to the wrong house." As she sobbed she began to describe all of the tragedies that had touched her family. She invited the widow into her home to explain in greater detail what had taken place. The widow remained in that home for many days, listening and caring.

When she left to resume her search the widow visited a modest home about a mile away. The experience was the same. Wherever she traveled, from mansion to hut, she was greeted with tales of sadness and sorrow. Everyone found her a willing and careful listener.

After months of travel the woman became so involved with the grief of others that she forgot about her search for the magic mustard seed, never realizing that it had indeed driven the sorrow from her life.³



³ Jewish folktale, from *Stories for the Telling* by William R. White, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1986, pp. 42-43.

The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria wrote, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.” We may not readily identify the pain that dwells beneath even the most assured and smiling face. What we do know is the experience of our own grief and pain and vulnerability. We carry our life experiences with us. They part of us and are a resource for understanding and caring. And we have been shown, in the person of Jesus and of our spiritual mentors, what compassion looks like,

*especially for the most marginalized among us,
especially for the most put together and seemingly secure,
and most especially for the person standing right before us.*

The gospel tells us to go forth with compassionate understanding and to be living witnesses of God’s healing love in the world. The rest is commentary.

Amen...