

A Heart of Compassion

Luke 7:11-17

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The Gospel reading this morning is a fascinating text from the Gospel of Luke. It is a relatively unknown miracle story of Jesus bringing a widow's son back to life. Our text tells us that Jesus had just arrived in the town of Nain, a town just south of Nazareth. When Jesus approached the town gate he came across a funeral procession made up of a large crowd. A widow's only son has died and, in keeping with the tradition of the day, he was being carried out of town on a funeral bier. When Jesus sees the woman he has compassion for her. Telling her not to weep, Jesus goes up to the bier, touches it, and says: "Young man, I say to you rise!" Scripture tells us the dead man sat up, began to speak and Jesus gave him to his mother. Those who witnessed the miracle were filled with awe and proclaimed Jesus a great prophet.

Our text is a fascinating story. Unlike the miracle of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead from the Gospel of John, the emphasis in our text is not about the miracle, but rather about the compassion of Jesus. Jesus knew that widows needed their sons to support them. A widow with no son had no livelihood. Without support from the men in her family, the widow would suffer from becoming the poorest of the poor, invisible to the ruling powers and a beggar. Having compassion for this desperate situation, Jesus brings the widow's son back to life so she would not be alone. It is an amazing act of love and understanding and a profound witness to God's compassion for every human being.

About four weeks ago I had a bad cold in my throat and lost my voice for a number of days. During that time, I went to the grocery store. When I got to the check-out counter I pointed to my throat and whispered that I had lost my voice. The man behind the counter smiled and started talking with me about all the different kinds of people who come through his check-out line during the day. Sometime during the conversation I whispered something like: "You must see everything walk through this line." He said he did and he really didn't mind the people he served but the one thing he really hated was when people treated him like he was invisible.

It struck me that his statement is at the core of our Gospel message. For Jesus, everyone counts – everyone is visible. As people who follow the Way of Christ, we are invited and called to follow Jesus' way of compassion and do our best that we don't treat others like they are invisible.

The way of compassion is both an inner and outer journey. On the one hand, we can make up our minds to practice acts of compassion. We can decide that regardless of what is happening in our own lives, our frustrations and disappointments, we will choose to be kind to others. I have come to realize that being present to others – showing up and seeing them for who they are – is one way of practicing acts of compassion.

As some of you know, I will be leading a pilgrimage in September to walk The Camino – a pilgrimage path across northern Spain that Christians have been walking for a thousand years. Yesterday we held a one-day retreat to get to know the other pilgrims, go over some details and take a hike together in the reservoir. At one point I found myself walking next to a woman in her sixties who told me that she learned a lot when her father was dying of Alzheimer's. For the last

three years of his life he lived in a nursing home. He did not know anyone and could not remember stories of his life. This woman realized that she had to give up any hope that he would know her because when she visited, she was just another woman who came into his room. She realized all she needed to do was to be present to him and to talk with him about his day. Now she is helping her sister who has spent the last four years battling cancer. Her sister has decided not to have another surgery and while others want her to keep fighting the cancer, my friend has accepted her sister's decision and will accompany her along the way by showing up and being present.

The Way of Compassion is not just about what we do or how we act. Rather, it is an invitation to a spiritual oneness with The Holy. Compassion is God's way toward us – as Jesus shows in his miracle at Nain. We are invited to recognize and see that God has that same sort of love of us. We are invited to open our hearts so that we rest in God's living presence.

I was with a woman minister the other day who is a deeply faithful soul. As we were talking she told me that some time ago she had a health crisis. She was filled with fear and anxiety about what the doctors would find. She felt that this fear and anxiety she carried meant that she was being unfaithful to God. This caused more anxiety and she began to wonder if she was really a person of faith. When she spoke with a spiritual friend about the fear, the friend suggested that she try to seek God's compassion for herself and to ask God to hold the fear and worry. While she was thinking about this suggestion she began to see a visual image of God sitting with her, caring for her. She saw that God held her fear and her faith in a great cosmic circle and she could share both the good and the bad with God – it was as though she was sitting inside a large ying yang symbol encompassed by the compassion of God. In the compassion, God held the darkness, the sickness, and the light, the love. While seeing this image she was filled with an energy and light. She knew that this vision of God holding all of her was deeply true – from that day forward she knew that God journeyed with her in all that she is and all that she does.

The process of living is not a process of being alone or invisible, but one of being intertwined in the great heart of God that leads us in the way of life. This is the power behind our Gospel story today. When we open our hearts to knowing God's Compassionate Heart holds us in all that we are and all that we do, we find ourselves filled with a spirit that guides us and gives us the energy to look each other in the eye and say: "I see you. You are God's child and I honor your presence."

May you be wrapped in God's Holy Light this day and forever. Amen.

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