

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

1 Kings 17: 17 – 24  
Galatians 1: 11 – 24Psalm 30  
Luke 7: 11 – 17

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One might wonder why the Creator – the one who has spoken into being “the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home” – one might wonder why that God pays any attention at all to us and our daily concerns which are so very tiny in comparison to the grander scheme of things. The answer lies in today’s passage from the Gospel of Luke. “When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her.” As incredible as it might seem, this transcendent God of the universe is also the imminent presence in our hearts. And in our daily lives. Never having met her before, at least as far as we know, and not knowing who she is other than a widow and a grieving mother, Jesus meets this woman from Nain for the first time and instantly has compassion for her.

How does Jesus know that she’s a widow? We’re not told. Perhaps it’s because she walks alone in the crowd with no one’s arm for support. Perhaps it’s because she is dressed in widow’s weeds – black clothing, or probably white in the Middle East, to indicate her status in this culture. How does Jesus know that this is the woman’s son on the funeral bier? Again, we’re not told. Perhaps it’s the age of the bearers of the body, younger men instead of those contemporary in age to the widow. Perhaps it is the double burden of grief weighing so heavily on this woman’s face.

Not only has this widow lost her only son, she has also lost her only means of support. All that she has had to live *for* and to live *by* are suddenly gone. In a society such as this, a woman already near the bottom rung of the social ladder slips down even further. She is about to become a non-person, one of the invisibles on the fringe of society. Now that her son is gone, she will have few other options besides begging to try to support herself. She is, in Jewish tradition, part of the “*anawin*” – one of the poor ones of Yahweh. We don’t know how Jesus knows these things about the woman. Some of us might chalk it up to omniscience, but that’s not a very satisfactory answer for others of us.

In the end, perhaps it doesn’t really matter how Jesus knows, or even *if* he knows these things about her. As Jesus, his disciples and his large entourage arrive at the city gate, they are met head on by a large crowd coming out of the city for a burial. One glance tells Jesus everything he needs to know. What *does* matter is that Jesus sees this lonely figure, this grief-filled woman, and he acts spontaneously out of compassion, telling her not to weep, even as he is reaching out his hand to help her in a way she could not possibly have imagined.

No one asks Jesus to do anything. Probably no one *expects* him to do anything. But apparently the compassion which he feels in this moment is an overwhelmingly irresistible force. Without hesitation, Jesus reaches out his hand and touches the litter bearing the lifeless form of the man. Touching a dead body is taboo and makes one ritually defiled. So does touching the bier, the flat frame which supports the body. Even touching one of the bearers of the body defiles a person. But Jesus acts without hesitation, stretching out his hand, not actually touching the dead man, but close enough.

Interestingly, as the Rev. Rick Morley points out, this story follows right on the heels of last Sunday's passage in which Jesus heals the centurion's slave, sight unseen, from a distance. And one of the things that these two miracles demonstrate, Morley says, is that Jesus rarely does anything the same way over and over again.

When Jesus heals the sick and the lame, he does so in a multitude of ways. When Jesus heals a blind man, he spits in the dirt, makes a paste and applies it to the man's eyes. When he heals the Gerasene demoniac, Jesus commands the evil spirits to depart and they do. When Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law, he takes her by the hand and lifts her up. When he heals the man with the withered hand, he asks the man to stretch out his hand and arm. And the woman with the hemorrhage has the courage to stretch her hand out and merely touch the hem of Jesus' robe. Touching the hem, but not actually touching Jesus' body is close enough.

When raising the dead, Jesus also does it differently each time. Jesus calls out to Lazarus to come out of the tomb. He takes Jairus' daughter by the hand. And of course Jesus somehow heals the centurion's servant without an audible command or a touch. Now, in today's passage, Jesus simply touches the frame and commands the young man to rise.

So even though Jesus seldom responds with the same action, Jesus always responds with compassion. The Rev. Dan Clendinen notes that the Greek verb which is translated "to have compassion" is 'splagcnizomai.' The verb form comes from the noun, 'splanxna,' meaning one's internal organs – bowels, heart, lungs, liver or kidneys. In Greek thought, the center of all the emotions is what we would call the gut. And to some degree, we still have that sense when we say things like "a gut feeling" or "trust your gut" or "gut-wrenching." Our English word 'compassion' actually comes from a Latin root, *com pati*, meaning to suffer with. According to Clendinen, the word "compassion" occurs only twelve times in the New Testament, and only in the Gospels. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is always a man of compassion.

Jesus commands the young man to rise and to the astonishment – and perhaps deep fear – of the crowds on both sides of the city gate, the young man rises up, sitting on the frame meant to carry him to the grave. When Jesus raises this young man from death to life, he also raises the man's mother from a living death to a new life. Jesus heals the woman, broken by a society that cannot see her as fully human without a man. A woman who almost didn't count at all suddenly counts once again. From the moment Jesus first sees this grieving mother until the moment when he gives the son back to the mother, Jesus' total attention is on the woman. [Like a camera zooming in, the crowds in front and behind blur, the focus is only on Jesus, the woman and her son.] Attention filled with compassion and mercy. And if we listen closely, we will also hear a foreshadowing in this story to when Jesus, dying on the cross, speaking to Mary and referring to his disciples, John, says, "Behold, your son."

You may have noticed a particular resonance between today's readings from 1 Kings and the Gospel. It's very intentional. Two widows. Two dead only sons. Two men of God who perform miracles. Throughout his Gospel, Luke means us to recognize Jesus as a man of God in the tradition of the prophets, especially Elijah and Elisha. So much so that he writes the story clearly parallel to that in 1

Kings. Both Elijah and Jesus live into the compassionate grace of God in their raising of the two dead sons.

It is clear throughout the Gospel of Luke that whoever wants to be like Jesus, whoever wants to imitate Christ, must be a person of compassion. Jesus views the world through eyes wide open. Open to seeing the powerless and the vulnerable, the neglected and the bullied, the misunderstood and the abandoned, the throw-aways of society, the ones who are poor in spirit and/or poor of material wealth. Likewise, Jesus' eyes are open to seeing the opposite – those who oppress or abuse power and trust, those who are greedy and those who are deceitful. Jesus knows that they *all* are in need of healing. Jesus doesn't really want anyone coming to the Kingdom of God movement just for what they might get out of it, and it's clear that he is afraid that his miracles and his healings might get in the way of people (such as us) recognizing our need for repentance and renewal. But Jesus' compassion and loving grace keep getting in the way so that he continues to heal the sick, raise the dead and perform miracles. As one writer says, Jesus breaks his own rules in the name of love and compassion.

Our mission as the church is to “restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” So what if we as the church were to really focus on following Jesus' example and break all the rules in the name of love and compassion? What if we were to dream big dreams of a world like the ones we see in the stories and ministries of Elijah and Jesus? Imagine our congregation being a church that cannot stay put, but takes God's welcome into the world. Imagine us in conversation with other lives, other cultures, able to invite and be invited to sit at other people's tables in order to learn and share the immeasurable riches of God. Imagine us building relationships outside our walls. Imagine the hands and hearts and feet of every member of Trinity, young and old alike, shaped for service, and imagine a corporate imagination where there is no end to the ideas of how to serve our community and the world. Imagine us as a congregation, propelled by the power of the Holy Spirit, travelling with Jesus – healing, reconciling, doing justice. Imagine us as a church filled with daring and delight to be children of God at work in this world. Imagine us, flexible and faithful, agile and able to follow Jesus into the marginal places of our society and the world. Imagine us, giving ourselves away and asking for nothing in return: a church mobilized for mission. [adapted from a UCC website, quoted by Kathryn Matthews Huey] Imagine compassion becoming an overwhelmingly irresistible force in each of us and in our common life together. “When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her.” May we dare to become – even more than we already are – a church built on the foundation of Jesus' compassion. +