

June 5, 2016
3rd Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
Luke 7:11-17
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It was a sad day. The funeral procession was making its way to the cemetery outside the city gate. There was a large crowd following the grieving mother. And she was moving numbly toward doing what every parent secretly hopes and prays they will never have to do – bury a child. As if it wasn't bad enough to be burying her only child, this grieving woman – the dead man's mother - is also a widow. Which means she fell even further down on the economic scale of protection and provision. She had rights to nothing now, without a husband or son to provide for her. She could very well end up living on the street.

While the funeral procession wound its way to the outskirts of town, another entourage is coming in the opposite direction. It is Jesus, his disciples, and a large crowd with them. "When the Lord saw her he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." And we are about to see what happens when Jesus shows up.

When Jesus shows up, the one in front of him can count on being seen. Noticed. Because Love sees – deeply. Love stops to give its full attention. This is what Jesus does. When Jesus shows up, he notices, and he slows down and lets himself feel what the grieving woman in front of him is experiencing. The English translation "he had compassion for her" doesn't capture the depth and richness of the Greek word used for compassion, which means "to be moved in the bowels", physically affected in his gut by the deep sorrow and despair the woman is feeling.

When Jesus shows up, he notices, he connects deeply and feels the emotions we are carrying.

Jesus says to the woman, "Do not weep." And he touches the coffin and tells the dead man to rise. And the young man sits up and starts to talk. And "Jesus gave him back to his mother".

When Jesus shows up, his deep compassion moves him to take some action. In this story, he brings a dead man back to life and returns him to his mother. It brings to mind for me the motto of Holy Cross Monastery which says, "Love must act, as light must shine, and fire must burn." Jesus, filled and moved with compassion must act.

There is one thing more we can count on: when Jesus shows up, life is going to be transformed in some way. Life will be different after an encounter with Jesus. Occasionally, the impact of encounter with Jesus will result in a very dramatic 180 degree turn that radically rearranges us – like death or near death being turned into life. Blindness being turned to sight; the one in captivity set free. Transformations like this we often call “miracles” – where the impossible becomes possible; the once hopeless situation bursts forth full of promise; the incredible sadness is turned into joy and laughter. Just like a funeral procession being interrupted and turned into a celebration, and restoration.

For the gospel writer Luke, it is very important for his readers to see and understand the depth of Jesus’ compassion for the least, last, lost, let down, and left out. Luke tells many healing stories in his gospel. There is a woman who had been sick for 38 years who battles through a crowd just to touch the fringe of Jesus’ garment, and she is healed. Immediately preceding today’s gospel passage where Jesus raises the widow’s son from death to life is the story of a centurion sending word through his friends to Jesus that his son is ill. “Just say the word,” the centurion says, “and I know he will be healed” – and he is. And Jesus commends these seekers for their faith.

But this story is different. The grieving widow doesn’t approach Jesus to ask for anything. She probably doesn’t even notice Jesus; she is utterly consumed by her grief. She just doesn’t think to ask for anything because she is totally in the grip of grief. There is a most beautiful and distinctive feature about this encounter, this “miracle”. This story is not about the woman’s faith or even about the gratitude that she might have expressed after Jesus gives her son back to her alive. Neither faith or gratitude is mentioned. This story is really about Jesus’ compassion. It’s about the way Jesus steps into the gap to provide what she needs when she is just too overcome, too ripped up to notice Jesus’ presence or ask for his help.

The good news is that Jesus’ compassionate response to you and me is not dependent on our asking or on our showing gratitude. Our places of vulnerability are where the grace of God most often shows up. The place of vulnerability is where the touch of Christ is made real and present. In our vulnerability is where the compassionate Christ meets us.

So friends, where is that place in you that needs to experience the compassionate loving gaze and the healing touch of Jesus? What is that place in you where life needs to be restored, the place silently crying out for wholeness. For hope. For peace. What hurt or wound, what disappointment, what yearning, what ache in you is Jesus wanting and waiting to touch and heal?

The Lord Jesus sees us, feels our pain, and is moved to act by bringing some change to the landscape of our lives. We count on Jesus to be there, to meet us with compassion. We count on being seen and touched by Jesus – and we need that reassurance, don't we? - each time we go to the cemetery and hear those words: "In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to almighty God our brother, our sister, and we commit his, her body to the ground: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

We count on our Lord Jesus to see and meet us with promise and hope, and to truly act each time we bring a child or adult to the waters of holy baptism and say: "Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." Sealed. Marked. Filled with power to live a new way of life in community.

We count on our Lord Jesus' compassionate seeing and healing touch, his absolute promise to be for us each time we bring our shattered lives, our broken hearts, our anger, our depression, our deepest hurts to the table of the Lord, and hear his words: "This is my Body, given for you. This is my blood, shed for you, and for all". Remember me.

For those who come in a few minutes to receive healing prayers, know that our Lord Jesus meets you here – sees you, has compassion and feels what you feel, and will act to bring about change for you and in you. It is grace that seeks us here, even if we're not sure we can recognize the Lord. It is grace that comes to us here, even before we think or turn to ask for help.

One experiment I would invite you to try this week is to take some part of your quiet time and re-read today's gospel. Visualize Jesus coming to you or to someone you care about. Imagine the way Jesus notices you or your dear one, looking at you with welcome, with a loving, compassionate gaze. Imagine what it is like that Jesus feels exactly what you feel as he looks at you. Imagine Jesus reaching out and acting on your behalf or for your loved one, deeply moved in his heart by compassion. And imagine the change you will experience in this encounter with Jesus.

The power of Jesus' compassion is real and offered to all of us, each and every day. So let our holy compassionate Lord take you by the hand, and hear him as he tells you to rise. Gratefully receive the hope, the peace, the healing, and joy, the life Jesus offers. Amen.