

When Compassion and Power Meet©

Luke 7:11-17

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Luke 7:11-17 (NRSV)

¹¹Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. ¹²As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. ¹³When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." ¹⁴Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" ¹⁵The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. ¹⁶Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" ¹⁷This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

She was a widow who lived in the village of Nain – a little village in Galilee. Her husband had died a few years ago. Her family was gone – her mother and father, died long ago. No brothers, no brothers-in-law to take her in; just a son – grown, beloved son who had cared for her as much as she had for him. Love was abundant. He was such a wonderful, caring, strong son who watched out for her, who provided for her.

But then, the unthinkable happened. He became ill and there was no help, nothing anyone could do. And in just a few days, he was gone. It was a shock to everyone who knew him and by the large crowd that gathered to show their respects, he was known and loved by many.

How can it be that we can have such joy one day – everything seems to be going okay – and suddenly it all turns around? Now she is walking, stumbling really, through her tears and grief, following along behind the coffin of her beloved son. The funeral is over. The words have been said by the rabbi, the blessings given, the last rites, the anointing, and now they are going out of the city to bury the body of her only son.

Luke tells us as Jesus and his disciples are arriving into the village of Nain (followed by a crowd of people) they pass a crowd of people going out of the village of Nain. It is a funeral procession. They were leaving Nain because ritual purity prohibited burials inside the city walls.

So at the city gate the two crowds pass each other. There is a large crowd of mourners following the coffin. But Jesus sees the widow – a woman who has lost her only son. Now she was not only grieving the loss of a son she loved but, being a widow, she most likely will not have anyone to provide for her, or to help her.

She is moving down on the economic scale and as much as she is grieving, she must also be experiencing fear. Life was fragile when it was at its best, in those days, but to be a widow – vulnerable, with no way to provide for oneself – was very frightening.

And Jesus saw this widow as he passed and his heart went out to her. He had deep compassion for this poor woman. The Greek verb meaning “to have compassion” is “splanchnizomai.” It occurs a dozen times in the New Testament. The verb form comes from the noun “splanchna,” meaning your bowels, heart, lungs, liver or kidneys, which in that day were the center of human emotions. Throughout the gospels Jesus is a man of “splanchnizomai.” A man of deep compassion.

There is a little word here that Luke uses, that we could so easily overlook. Luke says ¹³“When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her ...” “Do not weep,” he says to her.

This is actually the first time that Luke uses the title “Lord” in his gospel. David Lose, one of my favorite Bible commentators writes:

“Could it be that Luke is not just upping the ante of how to regard Jesus but actually giving us a clue to understanding who the Messiah and Lord really is? That is, I suspect that it’s not just the title “Lord” that helps describe Jesus, but that his act of compassion describes and even defines what it means to be Lord.

To be Lord, that is, is to be vulnerable to the suffering of another. To be Lord is to feel compassion. To be Lord is to not just feel compassion but to act on it, to do something. To be Lord is, finally, to heal, restore, renew, and in all ways to help.

And so Jesus the Lord and God’s anointed One sees this widow who has now lost her only son and with him any real chance of survival and Jesus has compassion on her, comforts and encourages her, and then raises her son to new life. That’s what it means to be Lord.”¹

Here is where we see compassion and power meet. Jesus did not just see the widow and have compassion for her, but he acted on that compassion with power – power that raised the dead son back to life!

¹ David Lose, “See, Thank, Tell,” www.workingpreacher.com.

THAT is what it means to be Lord! Compassion and power meet to accomplish the impossible. Compassion and power meet for the good of the weak and poor and vulnerable.

But, we are so used to those two things NOT going together, aren't we? How many times do we feel compassion, yet powerless to do anything about it? As a hospital chaplain in a trauma center, I felt deep compassion for the mother whose 21-year-old son was shot in the chest by a gang.

When that son died, after a long night of waiting with the family during surgery, all I could do was be present while the family went crazy with grief. I was powerless to raise their son from death to life. I'm not sure I was able to give them much comfort either.

I know you have felt the same way. You have a family member or a friend who you feel deep compassion for, yet so often wish you had the power to do something that would help. Yet you feel powerless.

And think about that word "power" for a minute. It is kind of rare, isn't it, to associate power with compassion? We hear of business giants using power over the little people who are vulnerable. We hear of rulers of countries who use their power to hurt others. We read of human trafficking where people are, still today – in this country – slaves to those who have them under their power. Yet, when we hear this story of "the Lord" we find compassion and power meeting up and being used for good. But that's who the Lord is, isn't it?

Think about this ... God, in his mercy, had such compassion for us – his creation, his children who were wandering here and there, who had lost our way, who were being sucked into every power that tried to convince us that we should turn from God and turn to something else ... God had such compassion and such desire to help us, to save us from ourselves, that he sent his only Son, Jesus, to show us how much God loves us.

He sent him, not as the King of the universe that he is, but as a vulnerable human baby, born to poor parents in a cattle stall. The gift of the Son of God was a great gift of compassion to the human race.

And think about his life. Poor. Oppressed. Hated by many. Yet, he was so compassionate – healing the blind, making the lame to walk, curing the leper, chasing out demons, forgiving the adulterer.

And the ultimate act of compassion that our Lord showed to us all was the cross. Remember how he said – after being beaten and mocked and spit on and nailed to a cross to die – "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do?"

I am sure that the deep compassion of God in heaven was so strong that day when Jesus died, he must have wept great, holy tears. But this is where we see compassion and power meet! The God who had compassion on us, and who had compassion for his own son, also had the power to raise his Son from death to life.

You see, when compassion and power meet – things – good things – amazing things – happen: the blind see, the sick are healed, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the lepers are made well and whole, the demons leave, the lost are found, the sin-sick souls are forgiven, the hopeless have hope, the lowly are lifted up, the dead are raised up to new life!

And you ... and I ... as followers of the Lord ... well, we are called by the same compassionate God to do these same things: to have compassion for all those who are in low and scary and vulnerable places.

We are called to see through the eyes of Jesus those whom others might overlook – the one who is made fun of, the one who seems to not have it together, the one who is grumpy for reasons we may not understand, the one who is suffering in a place we have never been, those in poverty, those with too many children to support, those who have addictions they cannot run away from – the list goes on and on and on ...

And we are called on to use our power to make it better. Not just feel and show compassion but to let compassion and power meet.

That may sound impossible, since we are human and we tend to not think we have power. But, remember, we DO have power – it is the same power the disciples received on Pentecost – it is the power that Jesus promised he would send; it is the sustainer, the one who draws us, calls us, gives us faith, leads us to people in need, lets us know what we should do.

It is the power of the blessed Holy Spirit that we all have given to us as believers.

Can we raise someone from death to life? Well, maybe not literally. At least that has never happened to me and I doubt it has to you. But, when you make yourself available to others who are hurting, grieving, sick with worry, hopeless and wondering how things can possibly turn out – when you are just willing to be with someone – you never know how the Holy Spirit might transform your act of being into a power that gives new life to someone feeling very dead.

When you give to the mission of our baby pantry or when you come and work for a few hours in the pantry or when you bring food for the food pantry or go on a mission trip to repair homes and talk to people who are in despair – do you know that you do have the power to transform lives?

When you have compassion instead of judgment, when you show mercy and grace and forgiveness when you know someone was wrong; when you are generous with your time, your presence, your gifts of money and resources, you have the power to make new life happen.

I'm telling you, when compassion and power meet, amazing things still happen! Believe it. Do it. In the name of the one who *is* compassion and power - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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