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The Miracle of Compassion

Luke 7:11-17

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Death is an unavoidable part of life. On Friday former CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite, who for several decades was probably the most respected news broadcaster in America passed away at the age of 92. It is amazing how every year so many well-known people pass away. Politicians, athletes, entertainers, and artists, are the ones who are noted in the media, but everyday we are reminded of the frailty and brevity of life. Death often hits the poor and unknown a lot harder than the rich and famous. That is the case in today's gospel which is about the funeral for a widow's only son. We don't know their names, his age, or the cause of death. None of that really matters – only that the woman had already lost her husband and now she has lost her only child. The Letter of James 1:27 says, *“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress.”* Jesus demonstrates his care and compassion in a remarkable way in this story that only appears in Luke's Gospel.

<sup>11</sup> Soon afterward Jesus went with his disciples to the village of Nain, and a large crowd followed him. <sup>12</sup> A funeral procession was coming out as he approached the village gate. The young man who had died **was a widow's only son**, and a large crowd from the village was with her. <sup>13</sup> **When the Lord saw her, his heart overflowed with compassion.** *“Don't cry!”* he said. <sup>14</sup> Then he walked over to the stretcher and touched it, and the bearers stopped. *“Young man,”* he said, *“I tell you, get up.”* <sup>15</sup> Then the dead boy sat up and began to talk!

And Jesus **gave him back to his mother.**

<sup>16</sup> **Great fear** swept the crowd, and they **praised God**, saying, ***“A mighty prophet has risen among us,”*** and ***“God has visited his people today.”*** <sup>17</sup>

And the news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding countryside.”

This story that appears only in the Gospel of Luke and it is very similar to stories that are told in the Old Testament involving the prophets Elijah (1 Kings 17:17-24) and Elisha (2 Kings 4:32-37) who are two of Luke's favorite prophets (see Luke 4:25-27). Both Elijah and Elisha restored life to young men. The Elijah story is almost exactly the same: the mother was a widow, the prophet met her at the city gate, and after the young man's life is restored, *“he gave him to his mother,”* an exact quotation by Luke (v.15) from the Greek text of 1 Kings 17:23. One of the things I like about Luke's Gospel is the great job he does telling stories. Writing for an audience that would have included both Jews and Gentiles, Luke uses the Old Testament in a subtle way. If one was or is

familiar with the Hebrew Bible, then in Luke's Gospel we can hear all kinds of echoes and themes that we have heard before. A person unfamiliar with Old Testament doesn't realize Luke is doing that and can still follow the story of Jesus in a clear and understandable way. In a sense, Luke rewards those who know the Bible by telling stories so that an informed listener or reader can say, *"I recognize that, that sounds like what happened with Elijah, God has done something like this before, I remember...."*

This story is also a dramatic example of Jesus' ministry of compassion. Compassion is deep awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the desire to relieve it. It is a human emotion prompted by enduring pain with others. Compassion moves us to an active desire to alleviate another's suffering. Compassion is considered in all the major religious traditions as among the greatest of virtues. In 2 Corinthians 1:3, God is described as the *"Father of compassion"* and the *"God of all comfort."* We shouldn't be surprised Jesus is full of compassion and that compassion shapes his actions.

In the excellent book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman states, *"The act of compassion begins with full attention, just as rapport does. You have to really see the person. If you see the person, then naturally, empathy arises. If you tune into the other person, you feel with them. If empathy arises, and if that person is in dire need, then empathic concern can come. You want to help them, and then that begins a compassionate act. **So I'd say that compassion begins with attention.**"*

Jesus' full attention is on the mother, this woman who is a widow and whose only son, her sole means of support as well as being her whole family is dead. How awful. It is sad enough when children gather to bury their parents, but it doesn't compare with the grief when parents have to bury their children. Jesus' whole attention is on this woman. The text says, **"When the Lord saw her, his heart overflowed with compassion. "Don't cry!"** he said. Jesus doesn't offer a prayer, like he does before the raising the Lazarus (John 11). There is no drama or ritual like Elijah who stretched himself out over the child three times. Jesus simply walks over, touches the stretcher so they stop, and speaks a few words, *"Young man, I tell you, get up."* And he does! The same word of Jesus that from a distance healed a centurion's slave (Luke 7:7) has the power to raise the dead.

For us, in our culture, we would want the on the spot reporter to get quotes from the son and the mother. "So what was it like being dead? Like sleeping? How do you

feel?” “As a mother, can you put into words what it is like having your son returned to you? What do think about Jesus? Have you ever seen anything like this before?”

It is interesting to me, that Luke shares no response, reaction or comment from the mother or son. Perhaps we can picture them in a tearful and joyful embrace. For someone to save the life of someone else’s child must create quite a bond between all concerned. Luke leaves it to the crowd to express a response to what they have witnessed. That response includes **great fear** – this is not something one sees every day and it is unnerving. There is also rightfully **praise to God** – this is a miracle like they have never witnessed before. They respond with words of faith.

“A *mighty prophet has risen among us,*” and “*God has visited his people today.*” Both these phrases are important.

“A ***mighty prophet*** has ***risen*** among us.” Luke begins his Gospel in chapter one saying the “*spirit and power of Elijah*” go before John the Baptist (1:17), and John is called “***the prophet of the Most High***” (1:76). Luke also uses the word “prophet” to describe Jesus because his ministry was similar to the great prophets of Israel, especially Elijah and Elisha (see Luke 4:24; 7:39; 13:33; 24:19). In his inaugural sermon in Nazareth, Jesus spoke of the ministry of Elijah and Elisha, including Elijah ministering to a widow at Zarephath (4:26).

In Acts, Luke tells us the early church preached that Jesus was a prophet like Moses (Acts 3:22-23; 7:35-37). The meaning of the role of prophet in Israel is very significant. A prophet through speech and actions brought the word of God to the people.

In Deuteronomy 18:18 the Lord says to Moses, “*I will **raise up** for them a prophet like you from among them.*” So it is no coincidence the crowd cries that a mighty prophet has *risen* among them. Not only that, but for us who know the end of Luke’s story, there is also a faint allusion to the fact that there will be others who proclaim Jesus has risen at the end of the Gospel.

The second expression of the crowd, “*God has visited his people,*” is also a favorite expression of Luke (1:68; 19:44; Acts 15:14). For Luke, God’s visitation is always an act of grace and compassion.

In hearing this story about Jesus raising a son, we can’t help but think of the end of the Gospel when an angel will declare that another young man, Jesus, has risen. Peter would preach (Acts 2:32), “This Jesus **God raised up**, and of that all of us are witnesses.”

Paul connected Jesus' resurrection with our own hope for life beyond death: "*Christ has been **raised** from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died*" (1 Cor. 15:20).

The resurrection of Jesus, the one who had compassion on a widow in her grief, provides the basis for the apostle's confident vision of the end (1 Cor 15:52), "*For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable.*"

The Christian hope of the resurrection is grounded in the fact that the one who had the compassion to bring back the widow's son has himself triumphed over death.

On Thursday, I read an extensive review of a book, it was an essay really in length, about the Nazi regime and the horrors of World War II in Europe that were inflicted by all kinds of people against all kinds of people. The reviewer related the author's perspective about how easy it was to get seemingly normal people to do very abnormal, horrific things including the mass murder of men, women, and children. I had such an awful feeling in the pit of my stomach, but I felt like I had to read the entire article.

Thinking about the contrast between the events of World War II and the deaths of over 50 million people, and Jesus raising a widow's only son – I found myself pondering those two events. Which has had more influence? What difference does it make what Jesus did for two people, when humanity is capable of killing so many?

And as I thought and reflected and prayed about that the answer that came to me is that human beings, myself included, are capable of committing acts of great cruelty and acts of great compassion. It is not an either or situation. The media likes to talk about "good guys and bad guys," but the potential for evil and good behavior lies within every individual. It is a continuum with two poles: cynicism, arrogance, callousness and cruelty on one end and innocence, curiosity, compassion, and courage on the other. What we can do is decide what kind of person we want to be. Which words do we want to describe us and our life? We can ask for God's help everyday in moving us further toward compassion and away from callousness in every aspect of our lives from how we treat our families, friends, co-workers, and neighbors to how we relate to total strangers to how we treat animals and even care for the earth.

In the Gospel, Jesus didn't even know who this widow was - **he simply paid attention to people and acted out of compassion** because he was filled with it. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "*I would rather feel compassion than know the meaning of it.*" Next Sunday, former Red Sox left fielder Jill Rice will be inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. Rice was voted in by the slimmest of

margins in his last year of eligibility. His candidacy was helped by the revelations of steroid use by so many recent players. Writer Jimmy Golen wrote a nice tribute that appears in today's Cape Cod Times, titled, *Rice a Hero Long Before Hall Called*. "The best thing Jim Rice did in a Red Sox uniform probably won't be mentioned on his Hall of Fame plaque. It doesn't show up in his statistics, or support his stature as one of the dominant hitters of his era.

Twenty-seven years ago, the Red Sox slugger climbed out of the dugout and into the stands at Fenway Park to help get an injured boy the urgent medical care he needed. Rice's quick actions saved the 4-year-old boy's life, his family and doctors believe. *"In times like that, you really see the quality of the character of the people involved,"* Tom Keane, the boy's father, said. *"Jim Rice is a really humble guy. He doesn't want to take credit for doing anything out of the ordinary. He said he did anything anyone would have done. I think that's an understatement of what he did that day. He did something that nobody else did. He may very well have saved my son's life."*

It was Aug. 7, 1982, and Tom Keane had gotten tickets from a friend of the Red Sox owner to see Boston play the Chicago White Sox. He brought his sons: Jonathan, 4, and Matthew, 2. *"It was a horrific day,"* Tom Keane said, *"We had been given some really great seats, right next to the dugout in the second row. We were really excited to be at the ballpark, close to the players and close to the action."*

Jonathan, who was learning to play second base, had latched onto Dave Stapleton as his favorite player. The Red Sox infielder was up in the fourth inning when he hit a hard line drive foul of first base. *"I saw the ball hit the bat and heard the crack and thought it hit the side of the dugout. I turned, and there was my son with blood gushing out of his head,"* Tom Keane recalled.

*"The next thing I remembered was Jim Rice picking him up. I picked Matthew up and we ran through the dugout. I was kind of chasing Jim Rice; he was carrying Jonathan. There was an ambulance waiting. When we got to the hospital they were set up for neurosurgery."*

Doctors relieved the pressure on Jonathan's brain and gave him medicine to guard against seizures. Tom Keane estimated that the whole thing, from the crack of the bat to his son laying on an operating table at Children's Hospital, took about 30 minutes. Jonathan was in the hospital for five days.

*"It was serious. I was in critical condition. An inch from my temple, and if it hits me in the temple I might have been killed,"* Jonathan Keane said. *"The fact that I was able to stay*

*alive was due in large part to the fact that Jim Rice was quick to react.*" This spring, when Rice took the Hall of Fame's traditional pre-induction tour, he said saving Keane might be his greatest accomplishment.

*"I've hit home runs. I've driven in runs. But as far as something that stands out, it's probably the picture when I went up into the stands and took the kid out of the stands who was hit by a foul ball. His dad said it and even he said it -- I probably saved his life."*

Civil war chaplain and pastor E.M Bounds wrote well over one hundred years ago these words in the style of that time about compassion,

"Compassion has in it the quality of mercy, is of the nature of pity, and moves the soul with tenderness of feeling for others. Compassion is moved at the sight of sin, sorrow and suffering. It stands at the other extreme to indifference of spirit to the wants and woes of others, and is far removed from insensibility and hardness of heart, in the midst of want and trouble and wretchedness. Compassion stands beside sympathy for others, is interested in them, and is concerned about them. **Compassion may not always move men, but is always moved toward men. Compassion may not always turn men to God, but it will, and does, turn God to man.** And where it is most helpless to relieve the needs of others, it can at least break out into prayer to God for others. **Compassion is never indifferent, selfish, and forgetful of others. Compassion has alone to do with others.**"

People are capable of the greatest good and, at the same time, capable of the greatest evil. Change will only come about when each of us takes up the daily struggle ourselves to be more compassionate, forgiving, loving, and above all joyful in the knowledge that, by some miracle of grace, we can change as those around us can change too.

George Washington Carver said, *"How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving and tolerant of the weak and strong. **Because someday in life you will have been all of these.**"*