

Luke 7:11-17 Proper 5C 2013
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A common question often asked in the heart of a personal tragedy or natural disasters like the tornado outbreak in Moore, OK or the violent deaths of the children at Sandy Hook is, "Where is God in all of this?" This is a question shot through with helplessness and hopelessness and deep pain. It is a question we cannot ignore or evade.

While it may not seem so for modern hearers, the story of the widow of Nain reads like just such a tragic story about bad news on top of bad news on top of bad news. Tragic news is delivered in only 9 little words "A man who had died was being carried out." These few little words will lead us into a reality with painful implications.

So the bad news begins with the announcement of a death. This sad news deepens to tragedy when Luke tells us that the man is young. In those days, as in our own, the death of a young person is always considered a tragedy.

As if this news is not bad enough, Luke then tells us that he is not only a young man, but he is also the only son of his mother. In current times this would spell out the tragedy of a parent losing an only child, but in Jesus' day the death of an only son created a far greater tragedy.

This son was to take care of his mother in her old age. Now he is gone. She has no retirement fund. She has no pension plan, no social security. She had only one son. Now he is dead, and so is her hope for her future security.

Luke delivers the final blow when with the bad news that the woman is a widow. This woman has known significant loss before! She has buried her husband, and now she is making the same painful walk to the cemetery to bury her only son.

She is completely and utterly alone. Beyond the pain of loss she is left with the fearful questions of who would support her in her old age; who would care for her now?

For this woman the death of her husband plus the death of her only son will likely add up to a life of poverty, hunger, disease, and an early grave.¹

We are offered a vivid picture of the crowds who accompany her as she makes her tearful walk to the cemetery. This would have been the custom. I am reminded of the images in the news that we see of funerals in the Middle East that still today project the image Luke describes.

This is no sedate Western approach to death where public mourning has almost taken on a shameful tone. No, this is mourning fully freed from the sad western convention of suffering in silence so the deep pain of death and loss is released and shared openly with the community.

Then Jesus walks up and discovers this funeral procession. He sees the widow's tears and in a moment that is beautifully captured Jesus tells her, "do not weep...don't cry." It is as though he perceives all the different layers of her tragedy, and he is exceedingly moved.

Luke tells us that Jesus' responds to her not out of custom, like the crowd, but out of compassion.

The verse actually reads, "When *the Lord* saw her, he had compassion for her." It is the first time Luke refers to Jesus as "the Lord"² and this title is meant to say something profound and it is written in a way that demands that we take notice...Luke wants us to understand that "compassion" is the *essence* of Jesus' *lordship*.

The word for compassion in the Bible has its roots in the word "*womb*."³ Therefore, to *be* compassionate is to feel and care for someone's pain in a deeply visceral way. To *be the recipient of someone else's compassion* is to feel deeply understood, not only from that person's mind, but also from their belly.⁴

Compassion is a word used rarely in the gospels; it is a word that describes the deepest kind of emotion we can have for another. So we have this poignant image of Jesus as an innocent bystander who allows himself to be touched to the very core of his being by this woman's plight.

¹ Opening is excerpted and paraphrased from Janet Hellner-Burris in *Bread Afresh Wine Anew*, eds. Joan Campbell and David Polk, 1991.

² Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

³ Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, (CITY: Harper Collins).

⁴ Wally Fletcher in *Lectionary Homiletics*, (Volume XVIII, Number 4).

In his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* Marcus Borg writes: "To trust Jesus as "the Lord" is to trust in his compassion, and to trust that *his* compassion is a true expression of God's. And for those of us who follow Jesus, this means that we too are also to hear "compassion" as our true vocation in this world."

What would the world look like if we all understood life this way? What a profound image to think of a world filled with people who could do no other but to respond to another out of a deep caring that was born in the very core of their being. We would not perhaps feel so alone when the tragedies of life find us or someone we love.

Of course there is always a certain amount of personal pain we must all travel through when life confronts us with a great loss or challenge. But the real pain in these moments often come when a few weeks have passed and the rest of the world just wants those in pain to fade quietly away to finish up their grieving in private. This is when someone's grief or challenge is compounded by feelings of extreme isolation.

And it is true, when we are trying to companion someone through a hard patch in life we can grow weary—not from a lack of caring, but we just feel like we run out ways to help and we just feel exhausted. But there is another way. Luke reminds us that there is help in trusting that God loves us in this deeply compassionate way that Jesus demonstrates today.

There is plenty of good news in this scripture for those in even terrible griefs as well as for those who seek to comfort them. As therapist and lay preacher Wally Fletcher says, "If there is help in trusting that our compassionate gestures (however inadequate) are under girded by the boundless compassion of God, there is even good news for the weariest companion or friend."⁵

We need not have answers—how can any one of us have any answers compelling enough to meet the fathomless pain felt in the face of great loss?

But we can always open a place in our hearts to simply receive and help another hold a terrible pain and quite often our silent, but unwavering presence holds the deepest wisdom and comfort we can offer.

And of course we must pay attention to the fact that Jesus' compassionate response is set in the context not only of personal grief, but also of social justice.

Jesus weds his compassion to his power. Often those of us with economic or social power often wield power *over* those in need, but Jesus' teaches us to employ these powers *for* those in need. This is a vastly different understanding of power.

And we do not have to feel our way in the dark in such times—Jesus teaches us today that we need not be afraid to *feel* for one another's pain—whether that pain and grief is personal or global we need not be overwhelmed by helplessness and despair.

God is with us in all times of tragedy and despair because we have all been given the power of God's compassion and we can use it to care *for* one another.

So in answer the painful lament "Where is God in all of this?" we can answer that God is right smack in the middle of all of it. We know this because Jesus, the very image of God, is not removed or unaffected.

God is shot through the heart by our pain with all of its wider implications.

God became flesh and dwelt among us so that we too would have the courage to weep for the world's pain and not be left impotent and powerless in the face of it—we are God's very instruments of deliverance.

God empowers us; God strengthens us. The Gospel teaches us that wherever compassion and the courage to engage one another's pain come together for the sake of the vulnerable and suffering of the world, Godly wonders can and do occur each and every day.⁶

This is the gift we have to share with one another in community—this is precisely *why God formed us for community*. As our ministry celebration will attest today we are not a collection of strangers who come together in anonymity to have an individual experience of God.

We are each unique individuals, yes—but as each us make our way into the church and find our place in our pew, we instantly become a new creation—we become the body of Christ. We become one people who together have the power to offer compassion that is magnified by the many becoming one.

Think on this today as we celebrate our life and ministry together. Look around at the people with whom you share worship and ministry and imagine the possibilities. Think on the hope and the truth that at our best and at our worst times in life, through one another, God is always with us! Amen.

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⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.