

Sermon for June 5, 2016

Luke 7:11-17

Pastor Alan Bray

Grace and peace to each of you in the name of Jesus, our loving Lord and Savior.
Amen

In addition to the parable which our kids have just re-enacted (The Good Samaritan), there are only two other places in Luke's gospel where the same specific Greek word for "compassion" is used. Just two other times when Luke uses the kind of gut-wrenching, stomach-turning, all-consuming compassion like that which overwhelmed the Good Samaritan.

One of these two places is in the parable of the Prodigal Son...or better called the Parable of the Waiting Father. You'll recall that the wayward son has finally decided to go home and ask to become his father's servant, but the father...who has been patiently, eagerly, hopefully waiting for his son's return, sees him in the distance and is immediately filled with compassion. A compassion that grips his very being. A compassion which compels him to run down the hill, to embrace his son and to shout with joy.

The only other place in Luke where this specific kind of compassion is to be found is in our gospel reading for this morning...the account of Jesus raising the Widow's Son from the dead in the village of Nain.

You'll remember that not long after healing the centurion's servant (last week's gospel), Jesus and his disciples, accompanied by a large crowd of followers, are about to enter the town of Nain when another crowd comes from the other direction. It's a funeral procession. A young man has died. His body is being carried by pall bearers. With them is the man's mother, a grieving widow, and a crowd of loud and wailing mourners.

As Luke tells it, we learn that Jesus' eyes are drawn to the widow. Among all those present, he sees her...and, says Luke, he is filled with compassion. Gut-

wrenching, stomach-turning, all-consuming compassion. Jesus knows full well the woman's plight...he knows that with her son's death, she is absolutely destitute...her situation is hopeless...she has no means of support. Thus, her grief is beyond consolation...and Jesus is overwhelmed with compassion for her.

Frederick Buechner once wrote that "compassion is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you." I think this is a fair description of what was going on with Jesus. The woman's plight had hit him like a ton of bricks. He could not be satisfied until he had helped her.

And so, as Luke tells the story, Jesus, overcome with compassion for the widow, throws caution and convention to the wind. He confronts the sobbing woman directly with comforting words: "Don't cry!" Then he grabs the funeral bier upon which the corpse is being carried. With eyes wide open, the pallbearers stop dead in their tracks. Jesus then orders the dead man to get up: "Young man, I say to you, RISE!"

Immediately, as strange as it might seem, the young man sits up and begins to speak. Jesus has done the unimaginable, he has raised the dead man to life. And then, in the midst of understandable pandemonium, joy, amazement and fear, Jesus quietly completes his act of compassion by giving the young man back to his mother. Her life, too, has now been restored.

As I try to make sense of this story, I'm lead to believe that the real significance of the account is not the miraculous resurrection of the young man, but rather the overpowering compassion that Jesus has experienced for the grieving woman.

Not only that, it seems to me that compassion is at the very heart of Jesus' entire mission and ministry. Whatever he does is somehow related to or rooted in his sense of compassion for the people he encounters. Using Buechner's words, his personal sense of peace and joy is directly tied to the peace and joy of those whom he serves.

That's what causes Jesus to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captive, to give sight to the blind, to free the oppressed, and ultimately, I believe, to make his way to the cross of Calvary. Compassion.

Well, let me shift gears rather dramatically at this point.

I want to know how it is with you.

What role does compassion play in your life?

What causes you to be overcome with compassion?

For whom do you weep?

What situations or circumstances cause you deep anguish or sadness or discomfort...to the point that you just have to do something on behalf of someone else?

Luke wants us to know that compassion is critical to our lives as Christian disciples. It is woven into the fabric of love and mercy, reconciliation and peace. Compassion ties us to each other and binds us to the whole human race.

My prayer today is that you and I might continue to grow as compassionate followers of Jesus Christ. And my request is that you might let me know how that's going for you. I would love to hear your stories. Give me a call and we'll make time for coffee, conversation and compassion.

One final thought.

You may have read that the MN Council of Churches has asked people like you and me to put an end to negativity directed against our Muslim brothers and sisters. From hate crimes to campaign rhetoric, there has been an uptick in vicious attacks, both verbal and physical, upon Muslim men, women and children. The recent guilty verdicts handed down to three young Somali men has only exacerbated the public bad mouthing of Islam and its practitioners.

We have an opportunity to exercise compassion with respect to our Muslim brothers and sisters. Tomorrow is the beginning of Ramadan. Ramadan is the month of the Islamic lunar calendar during which Muslims abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sunset. It's an annual observance, one of their Five Pillars of Islam. It is a time to practice self-restraint, generosity and, yes, compassion.

The MN Council of Churches has invited Christians all over Minnesota to put lawn signs like this one in our yards tomorrow through July 5. This may seem to be a small gesture, but it will have a huge impact. Our signs will be a public gesture of

good will. A public sign of compassion. A public witness to the fact that we are a caring, respectful, welcoming community. By placing lawn signs like this one in our yards, we dare to stand in opposition to the bigotry and hatefulness that threatens our society.

Therefore, if you wish, feel free to pick up a sign in the Gathering Space as you leave worship today.

Thanks. Let us now turn our hearts and voices to a beautiful hymn, "O God Beyond all Praising"Hymn # 880.