

Sermon on Luke 7:11-17
Title: Revolution and Liberation!

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When I first approached this text a few weeks ago, I believe I was especially moved by the widow's grief and desperate situation. I kept hearing this one line of the text over and over again in my head, ***"When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep."*** It took me back to the place in my life when I was a divorced mother of two small children for almost four years. I related to the widow's loneliness without her husband, and lonelier still, without her only young son. For me, this is a transcendent mother's story – just as real and desperate today as it was in first century Roman territory. The widow and I somehow became kindred spirits who had suffered in similar yet very different ways.

Unlike my context as a woman in 20th century America, the Gentile widow in Luke's narrative became completely powerless with the death of her only son. Her son was her only source of "Social Security." He was the one who inherited from her deceased husband. In ancient Rome, she was not permitted to work outside the home, and it was her son's responsibility to provide for her from any inheritance or from their working farm. Our widow and grieving mother could not own the property she shared with her deceased husband and son nor could she continue to work the farm. With the death of her only son, she immediately went to the bottom of the power chain – destitute – had lost everything, including her family. She was now subject to the whims and charitable impulses of the community. But who would take in another mouth that

needed to be fed? Again that haunting line of the text... ***“When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, “Do not weep.”***

In order to get more perspective on what Jesus was doing in this story, I dug a little deeper, and what I found fascinated me: Today, much scholarship agrees that the writer of Luke-Acts, a 2-volume Book, often relied on the Gospel of Mark as one of its primary sources. However, the story of the Widow’s son at Nain is only found in Luke. One scholar, [Graham Twelftree](#), believes that the Jewish author of Luke most probably relied upon the “story of Elijah raising the son of the widow of Zarephath,” which is found in 1 Kings, Chapter 17. (Twelftree, P174)

Both of these miracle stories were written in very different historical, social and religious contexts – with similar yet different theological implications for their readers. However, certain similarities are striking in these two stories:

In both ~~/~~ Elijah and Jesus are portrayed as Jewish prophets sent by God who have remarkable compassion for a widow’s loss of a son. In these stories, the revivers (Elijah and Jesus) physically touch the dead, either directly or indirectly, which was considered to be an unlawful Jewish act. Touching the dead was like the mother-load of all unclean acts in ancient Judaism. Following such an act, restoration to a clean or holy state of being required 7 days of purification rituals, which included bathing. Additionally, in both stories, the revivers are in direct communication with God – Elijah by vocal cries to God and Jesus as God’s prophetic conduit, rather than the Spirit at work in this miracle. Our writer of Luke emphasizes the restorative work of God through Jesus... not the Spirit.

In our miracle story in Luke, the village of Nain, which is a Roman city in Galilee, is located just six miles southeast of Nazareth, nestled at the side and foot of Givat ha-Moreh (which is a high and overlooking hill) in the Valley of Jezreel. Jesus, his disciples and several women are positioned just six miles from Jesus' home town in a Roman and Gentile village! **So Jesus was very intentionally taking his Jewish Jesus movement to the Gentiles (all non-Jews).**

As Jesus and his entourage approached the city gate, a man who had died is being carried out – with the large funeral procession most probably being led by his mother. ***Again, when the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, “Do not weep.”***

Now when I first read this story, I thought that there was only one miracle that happened - the raising of her young dead son to life. ***But the more I wrestled with the text, I discovered several miracles were revealed throughout this story:***

For example, Jesus, according to the writer of Luke, is emphasized as a prophetic messiah and a Jewish Rabbi sent by God to teach the Jews and the Gentiles a topsy-turvy way of life. ***This new way of life not only breaks with traditional customs and religious rules, but it corrects the Roman social status of people.*** Here, a widow (a Gentile widows at that) – much like the powerless orphans, is the one who catches Jesus' attention – stops him in his tracks and evokes remarkable compassion from him. How easy it was then and now to ignore those at the bottom of the power chain? But Jesus says “**No**” to such customs and social structures! He had compassion for this Gentile woman in her suffering. Now that's a miracle!

Another miracle is demonstrated when Jesus comes forward, speaks to the widow and tells her not to weep. Was he telling her not to weep because he could not bear to see her pain? ***Was her's like the pain he knew his own mother would suffer at his future death? It would seem that throughout the Book of Luke, Jesus is preparing his disciples and others for the day of his own death in Jerusalem and his new life or restoration by God.*** Again and again Jesus demonstrates with his miracles and lessons that death does not have the final word as far as God is concerned. A new way of life and new life is possible through God's boundary-less compassion and grace.

Next, Jesus touches the son's funeral bier, which was a rope or hemp sling much like a hammock. This was not only an unclean act for Jews, but also a silent appeal for the funeral procession to be stopped, and the bearers stood still immediately. (Fred Craddock ref.) ***With one touch of his hand, Jesus holds the widow, her funeral procession and all of the witnesses in silent stillness, awaiting his next gesture or word. Can't you just picture this miraculous moment?***

Then, Jesus commands with power and authority, "Young man, I say to you rise!" The dead man then sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. ***Jesus, much like the Creator God in Genesis, somehow "breathed into this young man's nostrils the breath of life and he became a living being."*** I imagine that this Genesis-like text goes on from here to say the words: "And God saw that it was good!"

The miracles continue as fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" These witnesses were Jews and Gentiles! ***But in this miraculous moment, they***

were of one voice – proclaiming the one God of all people! United by Jesus, they could not dispute what God was doing in their midst. **God was graciously restoring new life to the son and each witness through Jesus!**

Another miraculous moment is revealed when with one touch of the funeral bier and one authoritative commandment, **Jesus also raises the Gentile widow's status from no one to someone!** Jesus renewed the widow's access to her home, farm and modest income. She was no longer a woman alone who was subject to the whims and charity of others. This kind of restoration to wholeness always begins with God, continues through Jesus' life and ministry and **lovingly persists in our world today.**

For me, this is also a story about the salvation God offers the world through Jesus. Like other miracle stories found in Luke, **Jesus is seen as a revolutionary – a liberator of the powerless – the one of boundless compassion in whom the socially marginalized have hope for restoration to new, full and abundant life – now and forever. Certainly this is a miracle worth celebrating!**

This is a wonderful story of the hope and restoration offered to all by God through the human and divine Jesus. **But you and I can't work miracles in the same way that Jesus did.** We are not the messiah and prophet that the writer of Luke emphasizes for us.

So, let's go back again to the line from this story that originally haunted me and hopefully by now haunts you ~~too~~. ***"When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep."*** **This, I believe, is the most powerful of the miracles found in this story.**

When I was in the depths of despair in my first marriage, I desperately tried to keep my pain and suffering to myself – not even sharing it with my extended family. Well, one Sunday morning in the hallway of my church, my pastor noticed I was somehow different – something in my face was revealing my secret to him. Much like the remarkable compassion of Jesus, my pastor inquired if I was all right. Of course, I reassured him that I was fine... but he insisted that I stop by his office following worship so that we might have a chance to “talk a bit and catch up on things.” Once in his office, he asked me again, “Are you okay?” He said, “I am sensing something is wrong and want to help you if I can.” Like I imagine the widow in Luke’s story must have been, I was startled by Rev. Smith’s remarkable compassion for me. I remember that by his genuine and persistent compassion, I was finally able to share the deepest and darkest secret of my failing marriage. The tears rushed from my eyes and at one point I was barely able to speak words through my grief. Although I did not know it at the time, this pastoral encounter was the very beginning of new life for me. It was the first step toward the healing I desperately needed. My first encounter with Rev. Smith was over 27 years ago, and had it not been for his remarkable and persistent compassion for me, I would probably not be here with you today. ***The miracle of new life and healing is possible through compassion – which we learn from the revolutionary and liberating compassion of Jesus!***

We as his followers do not simply pass by the “funeral processions” that we see. We rely on the compassionate eyes of Jesus to show us when to stop, when to speak and when to listen. If we dare to help raise God’s children to new, meaningful and abundant ways of living, by the God-given miracle of

compassion, surely our Creator may whisper to us again and again, "It is very good."^(Genesis ref.) **Thanks be to God!**

