

## Proper 5C 2016 Sermon

### *Luke 7:11-17*

*Soon after healing the centurion's slave, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As 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. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 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!" This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.*

Today's Gospel passage from Luke directly follows last week's story of Jesus healing the slave of a Roman Centurion. In his beautifully insightful sermon on that Gospel passage, Bryan Fredrickson focused not on Jesus' miraculous long-distance cure of the grievously ill slave, but rather on the *spiritual* transformation of the centurion. Bryan noted that something must have happened in the very depths of the centurion's soul, for after he had initially sent Jewish elders to ask Jesus to come and heal his slave, he then sent a second delegation to Jesus with the message: "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof... But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed." Bryan stated that "What the centurion experienced was a consecrated moment of spiritual insight and recognition... in which it became crystal clear that his small centurion self paled in comparison to the energy, light, and love of Jesus." This man who wielded great worldly power, "embraced his littleness" and vulnerability, and trusted in the goodness of God.

Now, Biblical scholars agree that Luke intends last week's story of the centurion and this week's story of the widow as an inseparable pair. From the perspective of First-Century Jewish culture, both are outcasts: the centurion because he is a gentile and representative of the oppressive Roman Empire, and the woman simply because women had little status in that male-dominated Jewish society. Women were totally dependent for their economic support and social status on their husbands and adult sons. The woman in today's Gospel had lost both her husband and only son, and therefore was, according to one commentator, "in a catastrophic state... relegated to a status of 'dire vulnerability' – without a visible means of support and... deprived of her access to the larger community and any vestiges of social status within the village."<sup>1</sup> John Shea writes about the widow: "She may be weeping for her lost son, but her tears could legitimately include herself. In truth, Jesus has encountered a burial procession for two. She is [in effect] leaving the village to be buried with her son."<sup>2</sup>

But as this procession of death is leaving the village, a procession of Life, coming from the opposite direction, meets up with it: a procession led by Jesus, his

disciples and a great crowd of people. We are told that Jesus **sees** the woman (and he sees not only with the eye of his flesh but the eye of his heart, also) – he sees the woman and has compassion on her. Unlike the previous story, when Jesus commends the great faith of the centurion, no mention at all is made of this woman’s faith – nor do we even know that she is aware of Jesus approaching her. But *he* is aware of **her** and her “dire vulnerability.” He tells her not to weep – and in so doing, crosses a social boundary, for Jewish men did not speak to women in public; and then he touches the funeral bier – crossing a *religious* boundary, for Jewish men were not to touch a dead body, or they would become ritually unclean for 7 days. Jesus crosses boundaries to restore life to the son, and in so doing he restores life to the mother.

Now, both last week’s Gospel and this week’s Gospel recount astounding miracles, and when we read of them, it’s those amazing miracles that first capture our attention. But just as in last week’s Gospel the *real* focus was not on the cure of the slave but on the healing transformation of the centurion, so in today’s Gospel, the real focus is not on the young man who is raised from the dead – **nor**, if we look closer, is the focus really on the woman, either; rather, the focus is on Jesus and what the story reveals about Jesus.

“When the Lord saw her...” Luke writes. It is the very first time in his Gospel that Luke the narrator calls Jesus “the Lord” – and Luke is far too careful a writer for that to be an accident. Why would Luke call Jesus “the Lord” here? Because he is revealing to us what it *means* to **be** “Lord.” “When the Lord saw her,” Luke writes, “he had *compassion* for her...” It is this *compassion* that defines what it means to be “Lord”! The NRSV translation I read doesn’t really capture the full power of the original word Luke uses. Rather than, “he had compassion,” *The Message Bible* reads, “his heart broke...” When the Lord saw her, his heart broke! “To be Lord,” writes Professor David Lose, “...is to be vulnerable to the suffering of another.”<sup>3</sup> To be Lord is to have your heart broken.

At our Diocesan Clergy Conference a few weeks ago, Fr. Richard Rohr noted that in our prayers to God, we often begin, “Almighty God...” – whereas, if we really looked “the Lord” as portrayed in the Gospels, we might more *appropriately* begin our prayers, “All-Vulnerable God...” This would re-define power as powerlessness, which is a core meaning of the cross. Fr. Rohr states, “The **name** for this powerlessness which is power is Love.”

Now, let me pose 2 questions for you to ponder: First, what difference would it make in our world today if all followers of Jesus looked upon the suffering and outcasts in our world and had **our** hearts broken, like Jesus? And secondly, what difference would it make in our world today if all Christians began our prayers with, “All-Vulnerable God...?” I encourage you to try it this week! In your prayers, begin with, “All-Vulnerable God...” And open the eye of your heart to see the suffering and the outcasts in Canon City, in war zones and refugee camps

around the world, in the midst of devastating floods in Texas, disease and starvation of children in Africa – see all of this, and let your heart be broken.

It is important for us to remember that Jesus did not stop with *feeling* compassion. It would not have helped the woman to tell her, “Do not weep,” and then to do nothing to try to address her suffering. Jesus’ broken heart led him to take action on the woman’s behalf. Now, you and I will not be able to raise someone from the dead, of course; but we can – in response to our own compassion and broken hearts over the suffering and outcasts all around us – we can bring as much life to those situations as we are able. At the very least, our compassion will keep us from self-righteously judging other people, for it will reveal that they are our sisters and brothers.

Today, Shirley and Terry Squier celebrate their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, and they have graciously included us in their celebration! There is perhaps **no** situation where we become *more* vulnerable to another person than in a marriage. In such an intimate relationship, it is virtually impossible to hide our character flaws, our shadow side, our weaknesses and failings from our spouse. And because we are so **vulnerable** in the intimacy of marriage, it is easy to be hurt by each other, even feel rejected by the other. So how does a marriage last for 50 years? I can’t answer that question; I certainly can’t answer for Terry and Shirley. But I do think that we can identify at least 2 things that help.

First, in marriage we make solemn promises to each other in the form of a covenant, a vow that for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and health we will never abandon the other or throw the other away, but rather that we will love and cherish one another till death do we part. These solemn promises free us to trust the other’s love and to risk vulnerability. Terry and Shirley will be renewing their vows in a few moments.

Finally, and most importantly, a marriage lasts for 50 years by the grace of a God who, as Jesus supremely reveals, is compassionate and vulnerable. A God who sees our own dire vulnerability without our having to ask, without our even knowing the depth of our need, and responds in Self-emptying, Life-giving Love.

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke, NICNT*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997, p. 291

<sup>2</sup> John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 155

<sup>3</sup> “See, Thank, Tell” Wednesday, June 05, 2013

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