

Third Sunday After Pentecost
Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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“Ponder this question: who is more likely to lie, cheat, and steal – the poor person or the rich one?” Dare I ask us to vote with our hands? I won’t, but answer for yourself honestly. “It’s tempting to think that the wealthier you are, the more likely you are to act fairly,” says one author. However, a few researches found that luxury car drivers were more likely to cut off other motorists instead of waiting their turn, and that luxury car drivers were also more likely to speed past pedestrians trying to use a crosswalk, even after making eye contact. Other studies looked at different factors and generally found that “upper class individual are worse at recognizing the emotions of others and less likely to pay attention to people they are interacting with (for example, by checking their cell phones or doodling). Overall, these researchers found that “as people climb the social ladder, their compassionate feelings towards other people decline.”¹ Today’s gospel reading has something to say about this phenomenon.

Luke tells a unique story when Jesus walked upon a funeral procession. Initially we heard a man had died. He was the only son of a widow. This is important information. It’s easy for us to “see the suffering of a woman at the loss of her son. What we do not see is

¹ <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-wealth-reduces-compassion/>

the suffering of a widow who has lost everything.”² In this society a woman’s survival depended upon either her husband or her sons. The loss of her son as a widow meant she lost her whole life. There was no one to take care of her. She had no source of income.

“We should also lift up the fact that her grief is raw,” says Dr. Lucy Hogan. “According to Jewish burial laws she would have to bury her son within twenty-four hours of his death. That tells us that her son had just died. Surrounded by neighbors she is walking in pain and sorrow. One can only imagine the thoughts that were racing through her head – ‘What will happen to me? How will I survive without my son?’ It is not unreasonable to think that this unnamed widow would not have noticed Jesus or the crowd surrounding him. She was wrapped in the fog of despair.”³

Jesus walked into this moment. Into a funeral procession and stopped it. Jesus’ interaction recalled our first reading with Elijah. In that instance, Elijah took another widow’s son who died and cried out to God throwing his body on the son and brought him back to life. Here Jesus only touched the casket, commanded the dead man, and the son sat up and began to speak. In both instances, we hear that those gathered are amazed and praised God.

² Copeland, Verlee A. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word* “Luke 7:11-17: Homiletical Perspective,” p 117-121.

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2863

The story in Luke, though, is different than many other biblical healing stories. It's different than many of Jesus' other healing stories, in fact. In contrast to many other stories of Jesus' healing, here the widow never asked for help, she never sought out Jesus, her faith was never commended, and, in fact, the widow never spoke. Instead we see that Luke emphasized Jesus' action of compassion.⁴ You see, the key player in this story is not the widow, it's not the son, and it's not the crowds. Today the central character is Jesus. If Jesus is the central character here, then the crowd's response is key to understanding the periscope. In the story the crowd responded that "God has looked favorably on his people!" or another way to translate that from the original Greek is "God has come to help God's people!"⁵ In that affirmation they're saying, "this guy here, this Jesus fellow, he's done something different; we see God has come in *this* person; we recognize that God is full of compassion."

⁴ <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2016-05/june-5-10th-sunday-ordinary-time>

⁵ New English Translation

Why does this matter? Well, this idea of recognizing God’s presence in the form of Jesus is the crux of Luke. Remember, the author of Luke and Acts writes to Theophilus, which means “lover of God.” The author’s purpose is to write an orderly account designed to explore and answer the question, “Who then is this Jesus?” (Luke 8:25).⁶ Today we get a deeper understanding of Jesus. This Jesus is the kind of guy who walked upon a funeral procession and noticed. Jesus noticed the grief of this woman in despair. He noticed the surface loss *and* he noticed the deep loss of her entire life. Into this situation Jesus brought compassion. Not empathy, but compassion. Jesus does not simply understand or feel what another human experienced, that’s empathy. No. Jesus had compassion. Jesus stood with the widow, Jesus noticed the suffering, and Jesus worked to relieve that suffering.

This is *so* important for how we understand God *and* how we understand what it means to be a Christian. If we truly believe, as Luke emphasizes, that Jesus is God made flesh, then today we learn that our God is a compassionate God. This is an amazing thing! We now know that our God is compassionate not only to a widow, but to each one of us. Our God reminds us that there is nothing we have to do to earn God's love; instead, it's God's character and God's nature to be compassionate. Our God reminds us that it's okay, we're okay, and be kind. Then we are set free to respond to that compassion. And if we truly believe that as Christians we are called to both acknowledge our freedom in Christ and we are called to be agents that set others free like Christ, then our identity becomes one of compassion.

⁶ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2863

Yet, as humans we are not very good at being compassionate. Let's own that together today. Like last week, instead of me doing all the work to make this come alive here's where I need your help. Pull out the piece of blank paper in your bulletin. Take a moment to reflect on your week. Think of a situation where you weren't so compassionate with yourself or another. Remember compassion is noticing pain, personally connecting with the pain, and then *responding* to the pain. Then jot a few words, phrases, or sentences down about that situation on the paper. (After some time for reflection.) This is going to feel a little awkward. Be vulnerable in this. We are all human. Turn to a neighbor and briefly share the story of where you weren't so compassionate this week.

There are many times we're not compassionate in our daily lives. We are quick to judge and blame others when a young boy falls in a gorilla pit.⁷ We engage in negative self-talk thinking we're too fat, too stupid, too imperfect, and too inadequate. We blame rape victims for the clothes they wear. We judge the single parent for raising a child alone. We overlook the rising rents in Wicker Park and Bucktown that pushes out widows and the most vulnerable. We hurt the family members we're closest too with our language and tone. Time and again we show little compassion to others and ourselves.

⁷ <http://www.cnn.com/2016/05/31/us/gorilla-shot-harambe/>

Yet in today's gospel what we see is that compassion heals. Jesus' compassion on the widow literally turned into the resurrection of her son. While you are not Jesus, you do have the potential to show compassion and bring healing. In fact recent evidence has shown that a physician's attitude alone has a direct impact on healing. A positive emotional state allows a person to more fully connect, decreases their anxiety, and leads to a faster recovery. Over many studies they've shown that compassion can contribute to less pain with some chronic conditions.⁸

So, if my compassion and your compassion can have healing effects, then what would it look like for us to take seriously Jesus' example of compassion? Take a moment and look at the situation you described earlier. Looking back at it, how might you have been compassionate in that situation? No just empathetic, but compassionate in responding to that pain. (A few moments are given for those gathered to think.) Now turn to that same partner and share how you could have responded compassionately.

Luke wants us to take seriously today that our God is compassionate. Jesus notices *and* responds to those at the fringes, who are often unseen. Perhaps that's our lesson today. What if we slowed down our busy lives today, this week, this summer, or this year. What if we slowed down and began to notice those widow-like people? What if instead of avoiding the widow-like things inside ourselves we actually acknowledged them? Then once we noticed, can we take the empathy and turn it into compassion? Can we respond to the need?

⁸ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-r-doty-md/why-kindness-heals_b_9082134.html

Maybe it's as simple as cutting each other some slack, acknowledging that we're all bad parents at times, even if our child didn't fall into a gorilla pit? What if realized that we're all human and that's beautiful? Or that with every mistake we might have self-compassion to realize we don't have to be God?

So today, my friends, we get a glimpse at the character of God. We heard the compassion Jesus showed to a nameless, speechless widow. I pray that we might acknowledge the compassion our God gives us each day. I hope that we can recognize the humanity within ourselves and the humanity of the other. Once you recognize that, I pray you respond with compassion. It was the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria who said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle." So go out into the world to be Christ's compassion. Go into the world knowing you're not alone and you are deeply loved. Amen.