

Proper 5C
Luke 7:11-17
The Rev. Bonnie Underwood
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Compassion Without Limits

It wasn't easy being a woman in the 1st century.

It was a time when the culture placed a woman in a state of complete dependent on men...on fathers, husbands, and sons. And although it seems odd to us, living today within our 21st century reality, for women in the 1st century, the death of your last male relative, like today's gospel story of a woman burying her only son, was like having a noose cinched around your neck. Without male protection, you were on the edge, teetering on a precipice, without a safety net. Like Naomi in the Book of Ruth, this woman of Nain would be hard-pressed to find herself in a more marginalized position. She had unwillingly joined the ranks of those routinely exploited and knew that life as she had known it would never be the same. With her son's death, she had become invisible, one more of those with limited options and bleak prospects on how she would live out the rest of her life.

But this woman wasn't invisible to Jesus. Jesus sees the marginalized. He's aware of those in need, whether it's a tax collector in the treetops or a sick woman reaching out to touch his garment. Jesus sees this grieving woman and knows that her sorrow is not a moment of sadness, but that her mourning is fresh and raw. The Jewish burial rites occur within 24 hours of death and this woman is newly enveloped in a fog of despair. Death is hard enough to deal with when it happens to an aging parent or a beloved spouse, but when it's unnaturally out-of-sequence — when a child dies before the parent — it makes no sense at all.

But Jesus sees this woman and feels deep compassion. The specific Greek word used to describe this compassion, this caring, is prominent in two of Luke's greatest parables, the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. And in these stories, we can get a sense of the depth of true compassion, that extraordinarily passionate caring for another without any thought for self. It's a compassion-without-limits that would cause a father not to wait for his long-lost son to walk to his home and beg for forgiveness, but instead drives him to race out into the road with joyous abandon, embracing his lost child and welcoming him home with celebration and thanksgiving.

Compassion-without-limits inspires a Samaritan to wave off historic prejudices and fears and — rather than see an enemy — instead recognizes a fellow human-in-need, compelling him to graciously give all that it takes to nourish a stranger back to good health.

Jesus understands the widow's pain. Fully human, he understands her grief and responds in the way so many of us would — “please don't cry.” Fully divine, Jesus restores the woman's son to her with the power of his word — “Young man, rise up!”

This wonder, this sign, helps the woman, the crowd, and us to see the nearness of the Kingdom of God. For Jesus is the One. If we read just a few verses ahead in Luke's gospel, we'll hear of John the Baptist sending his followers to Jesus to ask whether he is the Promised One, and Jesus will point to his ministry — that that he fed the poor, caused the blind to see, and raised the dead — as proof that he is the Anticipated One.

This miracle is a foretaste of the kingdom. It points us in the right direction, gives us a glimpse of the possibilities of a restored life in Christ. For our Creator God — who created all that was, and is, and is to come — is concerned with the re-creation of all things, and Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, gives us hope. For our hope in the resurrection is not grounded in the fact that the widow's son came back to life, but in the fact that the one who had the compassion to bring back the widow's son has himself overcome death.

New life in Christ begins with baptism, with initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body. This bond established between us and our Living God is eternal. And today, at our 10:00 a.m. service, we will welcome a new member, Alice Leia Hartney James, the great grandchild of a former member of our parish, Juliet Richter. Juliet's son is Michael Hartney, a retired priest from the Diocese of Rochester. And Michael and Susan are the parents of Elton Matthew, and it's Matthew and Ashley's child, the almost-one-month-old Alice Leia, who will be warmly welcomed into Christ's royal priesthood. It is wonderful for this community to be able to participate in the baptism of a child from our own extended Holy Spirit family.

The Word breathes life into us. The waters of baptism join us inseparably to our Lord and Savior. As Christians, we do live in hope, grateful to follow a Savior with the power to raise the dead.

But living in hope doesn't mean our lives will always be easy. Like those who have gone before us, we too live in a troubled and broken world. So while Luke's gospel tells us that this particular woman's son was brought back to life, many more were not. Our Christian life does not guarantee us a life free from sadness and loss, from bad days or suffering. We won't always feel our prayers are answered, nor will every bad situation magically be reversed. Relationships can shatter and all that we attempt will not end in success.

But living with hope does help us recognize that our God is always with us and today's gospel description of this miracle is a sign of what is to come. Jesus sees us, and his compassion for us has no limits. Nothing can separate us from God. We can trust that our gracious God will restore and re-create all things. For there is an existence to come, an existence of full flourishing — the kingdom of God — and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, is at its very center.

Thanks be to God, from whom all good proceeds, through whom we are guided, and with whom we can walk on the path of light and new life.

Amen.