**Compassion Heals**

**Narrative Lectionary**

**Epiphany 5 - February 5, 2017**

Luke 7: 1-17 Russell Mitchell-Walker

As a minister, I can be aware of much pain, suffering, and struggle in the community of the congregation. It can be overwhelming. It can also be a challenge to keep on top of it. Sometimes I’ll be made aware of something after church, and if I don’t write it down it can too easily slip my mind. I may remember a few days or a week later and then feel bad that I haven’t followed up. At times like this, I remind myself that I am human and we are a people of grace and forgiveness. I am also very grateful that I do not have to do it all alone and really appreciated our Congregational Care Committee. This group of faithful folk, take responsibility for calling those who are going through a tough time in our congregation, or those who are not able to get out to church. Each month one of the members calls those who we have identified could benefit from some support to see how they are doing and let them know we are thinking about them. It is a real support to those in need in our community and for me as well. This ministry we do together assures me that once I have made contact or had a visit with someone, the support will continue through the committee. It is a real blessing.

In this ministry we do together we offer compassion. Compassion basically means standing with, being moved to offer support, and feeling empathy for another who is in crisis, or going through a difficult time. In both our stories from the gospel today, Jesus’ response is one of compassion. I believe that his responses of compassion and support for those outside the societal circles are more important than the miraculous healings, especially when we don’t usually experience such healing. In the first story, a Roman Centurion, a high ranking soldier, has heard that Jesus is in the area and has been healing people. He sends, first, Jewish elders, and then friends to ask Jesus to heal his slave who is very ill. Now some scholars believe that the context of the use of the word for servant actually means masters’ lover. So Jesus turns from what he is doing to help a gay soldier, who is also a gentile. The Centurion doesn’t feel worthy enough to welcome Jesus into his home and believes that Jesus can heal his dear servant by his word, just like his soldiers obey the Centurions’ word. Jesus sees his faith and applauds it, proclaiming that it is greater than any he has seen in Israel. It is through faith that the Centurion experiences healing for his servant/lover. Jesus breaks through the barriers of social norms and his mission to support and have compassion for a gentile who has deep faith, a faith he was surprised and amazed by, just as many were surprised and amazed by Jesus. The word used here is the same in both situations throughout scripture.

The second story, finds a large crowd walking with Jesus into town and they come across a large funeral procession. A widow has lost her only son, and as a result in the culture will be left vulnerable, poor, with no means to make a living. He is moved with compassion for the woman and stops, touches the bier or stretcher that carried the dead man, sees and speaks to the woman. Jesus enters into her tragedy. He knows the reality of her situation and offers her support. Partially because he knows his mother will be in a similar situation – tradition is that Joseph died before Jesus began his ministry so Mary was a widow. This explains why Jesus commends Mary to John’s care, from the cross – so she would not end up destitute.

In challenging times, in times of tragedy and grief, all we can do is offer support. Sometimes there are no words and it is enough to sit with, in silence. Other times, people can feel isolated and need to talk but don’t know how or who to talk to. This is especially true with regard to mental illness. That’s why the [Let’s Talk](http://letstalk.bell.ca/en/) campaign that took place last week is so important. This week I had a conversation with someone who has a family member with mental illness and they kept on telling me how wonderful it was to talk to someone about it. We will only end the stigma about mental illness when we are open to talking and listening, without judgement. It is a blessing when we find the support of individuals and communities when we feel alone and isolated in what we are going through.

Jesus restores the widow to a position of hope by raising the man from the dead, and giving her back to him so he can take care of her. Jesus sees the importance of standing with vulnerable women. This is compassion lived out. This compassion offers healing to individuals and the community. How do we offer this kind of compassion to women who are poor and vulnerable in our community? As we begin February, it is Black History Month. As we think about vulnerable women, Black and indigenous women are the most poor and vulnerable in Canada. According to a [Toronto Star article](https://www.thestar.com/news/immigration/2016/11/02/canada-chided-for-treatment-of-black-people-by-un-group.html) about a UN working group report on the treatment of black people in Canada, one quarter of Black women in Canada live below the poverty line compared to 6% of their white counterparts. According to the [Canadian Women’s Foundation](http://www.canadianwomen.org/facts-about-women-and-poverty), 37% of First Nations women living off the reserves, live in poverty. When women are in poverty, it also affects children. 50% of status First Nations children live in poverty and in Saskatchewan it increases to 64%. These are alarming statistics. Does it stir compassion in us?

The Greek word for Jesus’ initial response to the widow is *splagnizod*. He had compassion on her. The literal meaning of the word is for your bowels to turn over. I think we all know that feeling when our stomach turns when we see or hear something tragic. Jesus’ bowels turned over for the woman because he knew what she was going through and what it meant for her. I think we can all remember what we felt when we heard the news of the shooting at the Mosque in St. Foy, near Quebec city. Did your stomach turn? Your heart ache? This is compassion. It moved some of us to attend a vigil the next day to stand with Muslims in our community who were reeling from the news and all of a sudden were more fearful for themselves. Even I have noticed, with all that has gone on the last few months, that as I signed a petition, and put my name and personal information on it, that I had some fear. A fear that if things turn really bad, there is my name for the authorities to have and come get me for challenging the government. However I still signed, recognizing the importance of resisting and challenging the fear and recognizing it is not based on a lot of reality. I spoke with both Zarqa Nawaz, and Faycel Huggui (Faycel has come to our congregation a few times) and they and many others expressed deep gratitude for our presence there with them. Compassion moving us to support and action, solidarity, and standing with can be an important step to healing. It also involves listening and talking with those who experience tragedy.

Jesus stopped when the funeral procession was passing. He could have left it at that, but he was moved to go to them, to put his hand on the bier, and they stood still. He saw the woman, and spoke to her. The process of healing involved feeling compassion, seeing the woman, and talking to her. See, feel, hear. A guide for us in responding to tough situations others’ are going through. And when we are going through challenging, grieving, devastating times, may we remember to draw on our faith, like the Centurion, knowing that God is with us, that we are surrounded by a community of love that we can turn to, that being part of a faith community has created for us, for such times as these. May it be so.