

Sermon 061117 Compassion

Scripture: Luke 7:11-17

1Kings 17: 7-24

Sermon Title- From Heart to Hand

Did you notice the similarities between the two readings this morning? When I first read these two together I got kind of a creepy feeling that the writer of the Gospel of Luke might have stolen this story from the writer of Kings. Stealing from others is called plagiarism in the world of words and ideas. We know that Kings was written first. Having been in seminary, I'm very sensitive about the plagiarizing issue. Using someone else's four words together without giving proper credit or lifting an idea directly without credit are grounds for being kicked out of BU School of Theology. I'll guess that the writer of Luke would have been out on his ear on this one.

Now, I'm not saying that he did plagiarize. I'm just saying that someone who watched for things like that would be immediately suspicious. 1Kings has the prophet Elijah and Luke, of course, has Jesus. Both stories have the holy man at the town gate; they both have the widow; they both have the dead son; they both have the raising of the dead son by the holy man; both have the giving of the revived son back to the mother, both have the recognition that the holy man is from God. It looks like an open and shut case of plagiarism. But, when you look at the Bible as a whole, you see the same stories popping up over and over again. Is it plagiarism or something else?

Well, there are a number of possible explanations. The most common is that Jesus was the ‘fulfillment of the scriptures.’ It is the notion that what came before Christ anticipated the Christ event and everything that has happened since Christ is in light of the Christ event. Elijah’s job in the Hebrew Bible was to announce or anticipate arrival of the messiah. John the Baptizer is often compared to Elijah. They both dressed in animal hide with leather belt and ate locust and honey. Elijah is with Moses at the transfiguration of Jesus. So for Christians, Elijah’s ministry, like John the Baptizer’s ministry, anticipated Jesus’ ministry. It makes sense that this story has so many parallels. Jesus did what Elijah did but brought messianic power to the situation. It appears deliberate because these stories match up so well. So Jesus repeats the same act that Elijah did *but with the dimension* that he is the messiah.

Let’s look at the story in Luke in order to try to see what this story might be about. It appears that in this story, the widow was not a Jew. The widow in the Elijah story wasn’t. Jesus is traveling through a town in which Jews were a minority.

An important thing to realize is that a widow in the ancient near east almost by definition was destitute. So this woman had lost her husband, was very poor and her only child, a son, dies. She was in about as sorrowful situation as conceivable. Now, the raising of the dead part of this story is the headline, of course. It is always a spectacular moment when Jesus heals someone but when he raises someone from

the dead, it's off the charts. I don't think that is what this story is really about, however. I mean it is a huge part but it is not, I think, what we can take away. Let me explain a little about goals of sermons. In general terms, we take the stories from scripture and try to find something in them to use in everyday life. I don't think I'd be very effective this morning if I just said in my sermon, "Okay, go out and raise people from the dead." I expect that if any of you had that kind of power, I might have heard about it by now. Even if we did have the power to raise people from the dead, I frankly don't have the confidence in our judgment that I have in Jesus' judgment. I suspect that most of the dearly departed might choose to be left alone. That would be my luck. I'd raise someone from the dead and have them sit up and say, "What da hell did you do that for?" But I digress.

What I want to point out to you, however, is verse 13 from Luke's gospel, "When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, 'Don't cry.'" This is a story of the compassion of Jesus. Jesus was moved to the depths of his heart by this widow and her situation. He didn't feel pity, but compassion. Pity has the experience of looking down at someone and feeling bad for them while keeping your distance. Compassion is more about being equal. We use the word empathy to connect with someone else's suffering. It is kind of like the difference between charity and giving. Charity has a superior/inferior feel to it.

Giving is more about equality. Compassion is about taking another's sorrows to your heart and reaching out to help.

This story of a poor widow who loses her son speaks to the pathos and poignancy of human life. It is Jesus connecting to the human condition with all its pain and tragedy. It is a display of his love of humans at our most vulnerable that makes him one of us. This may be the most beautiful story in the gospels for that reason. Jesus is intensely human yet he is also God. Jesus has the power to raise the son from the dead and does so out of compassion. Now there are some in Christianity that look to de-mystify Jesus. They revere Jesus but don't want to believe that he had the power to raise people from the dead. There are multiple theories of Jesus being able to recognize that the son was in a catatonic coma and not actually dead. Theories abound that try to explain how that could happen without Jesus having the power of God. That question really doesn't interest me. Maybe we can go with the great quote from Albert Einstein, "There are really only two ways to live your life. One way is to think there are no miracles. Another way is to think of everything as a miracle." Instead of worrying about how Jesus acted, what we can take from this story is that Jesus acted out of compassion.

Jesus teaches us that compassion is a call to action. Compassion is about feeling the suffering of another in your heart so as to be moved to act on it. It matters less what the action is than that it is done and it

originates in the heart. That is the way of Christ. It is important that the widow in the story is not a Jew. Jesus of course was Jewish. The fact that his compassion reached across ethnic and religious barriers is an important lesson for us. It is reminiscent of the Parable of the Good Samaritan that Jesus tells in Luke's Gospel. He is teaching us that we are all God's children, no matter our race, color, or creed. We are one. This story is about opening our hearts to the sorrows of others and taking action try to ease that sorrow. Compassion is the ability to feel for others in the heart and to be willing and able to take the action to help. The path of compassion is from heart to hand. We are the disciples of Jesus. If we don't live compassionate lives, who will? AMEN