

Sermon February 9 2025 Rick Floyd

SCRIPTURE LESSON: Luke 7:1-17

“After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly and who was ill and close to death. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.” And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore, I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me, and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.” When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and, turning to the crowd following him, he said, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

Soon afterward he 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 was moved with compassion for her and said to her, “Do not cry.” Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stopped. 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 visited his people!” This word about him spread throughout the whole of Judea and all the surrounding region.

SERMON: “Moved to Compassion” The Rev. Richard L. Floyd

What makes you cry? What moves you? I may have been an emotional person before I suffered a Traumatic Brain Injury 25 years ago, but I certainly am one now. I get choked up, sometimes even when I’m preaching. If that happens this morning, don’t be concerned. It won’t bother me and it shouldn’t bother you. My TBI makes me “emotionally labile,” but you needn’t have a head injury to be moved to tears. I’m just an extreme case, a literal “head case.” There’s even a word for it: “Tearful or given to weeping.” It is called “lachrymose” from the Latin for “weeping.” Lachrymose: isn’t that a cool word?

There are certain texts or songs that move me to tears. Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech gets me every time. I weep through John 1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

Some of the music that chokes me up is about weeping itself, as in the St. Matthew’s Passion. When Peter weeps after betraying Jesus: “Just then the cock crowed. Then Peter remembered the words of Jesus, when he said to him: “Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” And Peter went out and wept bitterly. It’s even more poignant in the German: “bitterlich.”

Or the aptly named “Lacrimosa” from Mozart’s Requiem. “Full of tears will be that day; when from the ashes shall arise. the guilty man to be judged.” I’ve sung that twice now with Berkshire Lyric at Ozawa Hall and I had to really bear down to get through it both times. Also, the music is really beautiful. Which doesn’t help.

So, I’ve always believed one should pay close attention to these choked-up moments in your life because they mean something important. They mean that something authentic has moved you deeply in your soul.

That is what is going on in our stories today. We have two stories from Luke where Jesus is deeply moved by the suffering of others. He is moved by the centurion’s faith, and he is moved by the grieving widow in Nain, whose only son has died.

Our theme for this morning is compassion, which Jesus both practices and embodies. In telling the story of Jesus, a generation or more after Jesus’s death, Luke is trying to teach the church what God is like, and therefore, what God’s people should be like, a community of compassion.

Remember how Luke describes Jesus reading the Isaiah scroll in his home synagogue in Nazareth. He read: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”

That was Jesus’s calling: To bring good news to the poor. So, who are the poor? The poor are those who suffer. They may be wealthy or impoverished, but in their suffering they are poor.

In our first story the Roman centurion fears for the life of a favorite slave. In Luke’s view of the Gospel’s inclusivity, even a hated Roman enemy is not outside the scope of Jesus’s love and attention. The centurion is not literally poor, for he is a powerful soldier with authority over a hundred men, but he is poor in his need. His slave is dying and he heard about Jesus and believes Jesus can heal him. Jesus is “amazed” by his faith and heals the slave.

I want to say something about the Greek word translated here as compassion. Compassion literally means “suffering with.” The Greek word here translated as “compassion,” is *splagchnizomai* (that’s easy for me to say!) It comes from *splagchna*, which means “intestines; guts.” Jesus’s reaction to the widow’s plight is literally visceral, gut wrenching, brought on by empathy for a mother who lost her child, one of the most difficult of all human experiences.

Jesus also knows that having lost her only son as well as her husband, she is now doubly vulnerable. For in the patriarchal world of the first-century Roman Empire, widows were solely dependent on their male relatives for sustenance and safety. Here is compassion, suffering with the sufferer.

Now Luke’s Gospel describes many acts of compassion by Jesus, but he only uses this particular long hard-to-pronounce word for compassion three times, and the other two are some of your favorite stories that are found only in Luke. Can you guess what they might be? What comes to mind?

First, there is the story of the good Samaritan, who had compassion on the man beaten by brigands and left by the side of the road to die. We see Luke's universality there, too, since the Samaritan is a hated enemy, who shows mercy after the official representatives of the religious establishment passed by on the other side of the road.

The other example is the story of the waiting father and his two sons. The father sees the lost prodigal from far off and has compassion for him.

So, likewise, Jesus is moved to compassion for the widow. Picture with me these two processions that meet outside the city gate in the village of Nain. One is a procession of death, with the dead son on a stretcher, his bereaved mother, and a great crowd of mourners headed to the graveyard.

The other is a procession of life, with Jesus, his disciples, and a great crowd of exuberant followers. The two processions collide, and the procession of life wins. Jesus raises the dead son from death to life, the first time he does this.

Why does Luke place this here in his story? Soon, in Luke 7:22, Jesus will tell John the Baptist's disciples to report back to John that they have seen and heard miraculous signs and wonders, including the raising of the dead.

The Good News that Jesus brings means the leveling of established positions and privilege. My teacher and friend, Max Stackhouse, went to India for a year with his family, where Max was a guest professor at United Theological Seminary in Bangalore. It was a life-changing experience for Max, who came to view the Indian caste system as a great systemic evil.

He told me how the Good News of Jesus was powerfully attractive to the lowest castes in India. Christians make up only 2.3% of the population, and many of them had been Dalits, whom we once labeled "untouchables."

Jesus comes with good news for the poor, the last, the least and the lost of society. He touches the Untouchables. And he comes with good news for us, the privileged, who are also poor in our own ways.

Henri Nouwen once described Jesus' life of compassion as the "path of downward mobility." Jesus chooses suffering, rejection, and death rather than the path of "upward mobility" toward privilege and power.

Jesus didn't reach down and lift the poor up from above. He became poor, "he suffered with," and according to Luke, it was this very suffering that led him to the cross, "for us and all people." Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection are what enables redemption, atonement, indeed, relief from suffering for all humanity. Jesus' "path of downward mobility" differs from the idea today that compassion means helping "those less fortunate than we are."

One of the things I truly love about the Cathedral of the Beloved is the way the leaders erase the distinction between the helpers and the help-ees. Sure, we prepare a meal to serve, but we all eat it together in a community. The Food Program at United Church of Christ, Pittsfield, does the same thing; you can't tell whose is there for food or there to volunteer. Sometimes those groups overlap. And this gives everyone dignity and erases the stigma.

In Jesus we see this important distinction between compassion and pity. Jesus knows you can't love down, from a place above or apart. Even some of the terms we use, such as "the underprivileged," or the "less fortunate" keep us above those we serve, who like us, are beloved children of God.

Real compassion, as embodied by Jesus, runs counter to our culture's constant call for success, achievement and wealth. Real compassion is a call to suffer with the powerless.

A Christian faith true to the life and teachings of Jesus should never seek to be powerful and rise above others. That is why I have condemned Christian Nationalism, and the popular and rich preachers of the Prosperity Gospel as being false to what Jesus stood for.

We are not in a society that honors or displays much compassion. This very week the richest man in the world cut aid, food, and medicine, to the poorest people on earth, some of whom will now die. We daily see new policies that are the opposite of compassion, they are cruel and mean and go to the heart of who we are as a country. And in my opinion, the cruelty is not a bug, but a feature. It's the point. The obscene worship of wealth and power is directly opposite of what Jesus taught and who he was.

There has been some push-back from the Christian Church. We've seen a brave Episcopal bishop, Marianne Budde, gently entreat the President to have mercy on the scared and vulnerable. The Roman Catholic church has declared the war on immigrants to be incompatible with Catholic Social Teaching. The Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Elizabeth Eaton, has spoken out about misinformation on social media about her church's funding when General Flynn tweeted that the Lutheran Church was "a money-laundering scheme." Our own United Church of Christ has spoken out, and there is an Immigration Support Meeting on Zoom today at 2:30.

So, what can we do? I have two suggestions. First, I suggest we partner with any groups on the ground who are working to implement compassion for those who are suffering. Our UCC Conference has lists of organizations that are helping immigrants.

Secondly, let us continue to be a laboratory of the compassionate community. Let us continue to live out the radical inclusivity that Jesus taught and embodied. Let us continue to be faithful to our covenant, and to being "Open and Affirming" to all people. Let us pray with and for each other and support each other. Let us tell the truth in love, and not give in to our fears. Let us reach out to those in our communities that are being harmed.

Finally, let us be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord and Savior. We may not be the powerful of society, but we are not powerless. There is a different kind of power available to

us through him who loved us. For I am convinced that nothing will separate us from the love of God, not life or death, not oligarchs and autocrats. Nothing will separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. And the truth of that moves me deeply and chokes me up! Amen.