

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
June 10, 2007  
2nd Sunday after Pentecost (Kingdomtide)  
The Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

I Kings 17:17-24  
Psalm 30:1-6  
Galatians 2:11-21  
Luke 7:11-17

If you live in this world for any length of time, it doesn't take you long to discover that there are many kinds of grief in life. There is the grief of

- \* divorce
- \* sickness
- \* disability
- \* disintegration of friendships
- \* the loss of a spouse
- \* unemployment
- \* children leaving home

But of all griefs, perhaps none is worse than the death of a child. There is sadness enough when children bury parents, but it does not compare to the grief attending nature's reversal, when parents bury children. (cf. Fred Craddock)

This is precisely what has happened in our Gospel lesson to a woman from the small village of Nain. This story is unique to Luke, and this is the only mention of the village of Nain in the entire New Testament. Interestingly, Nain was only about three miles from the village of Shunem, where the prophet Elijah raises up the widow's son in our Old Testament lesson for today.

This poor woman must be facing unspeakable grief. She is a widow, which means she has already buried her husband. Now she has suffered the loss of her only son.

As traumatic as this is, we must remember that in Jesus' day the death of your only son created additional sorrow because the son had responsibility for caring for his mother in her old age. From this woman's perspective, it is no exaggeration to say that not only is her son dead, but so are her hopes for her future.

As Jesus and his entourage are entering the village, the woman and the funeral procession are coming out of the city gate. And Luke tells us: "When the Lord saw her, his heart overflowed with compassion" (v. 13).

If this were a movie, this would be the point where the crowd noise would be subdued, and where the camera would zoom in, and where we would see that Jesus' complete attention is on this woman. He is fully present to her. He is completely in the now moment. And in his compassion, he receives the gift of weeping from one who has nothing else to give. This is the heart of God, opening itself and entering into this woman's pain.

Let me ask you a question this morning: When your heart is broken, do you believe that God also feels pain? When your tears are the only thing you have to offer God, do you believe that God cries with you?

Well, he does...

Many years ago the famous minister William Sloan Coffin had his heart broken. On a stormy night in Boston, his 24 year old son Alex lost control of his car, crashing it into the Boston Harbor where it sank with him inside it.

In a sermon the following week, William Sloan Coffin shared from his broken heart these words: “my consolation lies in knowing...that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s was the first of all our hearts to break.” [Lectionary Homiletics, 18:4, p. 24]

In my many years of pastoral ministry, one of the questions that has been asked of me perhaps more than any others is, “why does God allow bad things to happen to people?”

My answer, after 14 years of formal education, three degrees on the wall, and twelve years of pastoral experience, is: *I don’t know.*

Here is something I do know. Luke tells us, “when the Lord saw this woman, his heart overflowed with compassion.”

We are now entering the long season we call Kingdomtide, where we reflect on what it means to be the Church, where we live as the Church, and where we prepare for the Lord’s coming. Could it be that Luke is telling us here that hearts of compassion go hand in hand with Jesus’ Lordship?

When we gather here each week we pray, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Just what are we asking when we say those words?

Just for fun, let me take a stab at it. I think that when we pray “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” that we are asking the Holy Spirit to make our hearts tender, to give us hearts full of compassion, to help us see people like Jesus saw this woman, so that even when we are not able to fix or to heal others’ pain, we can at least in some way *share* it.

In a world too busy to even notice persons, let alone see them in pain, I believe that the Holy Spirit wants to give us hearts so full of compassion that when others are in pain, we can enter into it with them, pray for them, and weep with them through the night until joy comes in the morning.

As we travel through this long season of Kingdomtide, let us keep close to our hearts this important truth from Luke: *Jesus’ Lordship and compassion go hand in hand*. Someone you encounter this week, and perhaps even today, is hurting. But if by the Spirit of God you see them through eyes of compassion, what might happen?

It is significant that Luke ends this story by telling us that the people praised God saying, “God has *visited* his people today.” The visitation of God is linked to a miracle, yes. Jesus gives this woman her son back. But do you want to know an

even greater miracle? We can share and extend the *compassion* of Jesus that engendered that resurrection.

As we come to the Table this morning, let us open ourselves to God's grace, so that Jesus' Lordship and our compassion go hand in hand, not only among ourselves, but also to a world hurting and in need.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.