

## **"Compassion, Death, Resurrection"**

### **Luke 7: 11-14**

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

CCUMC

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#### **Before reading scripture:**

This story from 1 Kings of Elijah and the story from Luke for today have deep resonances. In fact, the author of Luke is deliberately using the same language from this story of Elijah resuscitating a widow's son. Luke's purpose in closely following a story of one of Israel's great prophets is to show that Jesus stands in the prophetic line and completes it, showing himself to be a greater prophet than even Elijah. Listen closely to these two stories, noting similarities, and a couple of important differences.

#### **Readings of 1 Kings and Luke 7: 11-14**

#### **Two Stories**

These stories tell of two widows, two dead sons, and two prophets who restored those sons to life. Both the widow of Zarephath and the widow of Nain dwell in grief. They have lost a child, the most devastating loss to bear. In Israel being a widow without a son mean not only emotional, but also financial destitution. For an Israelite woman, one's children were one's retirement. These single moms, who poured their lives and wherewithal into raising their children, then in turn are dependent upon their children, particularly

their sons, for support in their older years. Without a husband and without a son, these two widows were facing almost certain death themselves from hunger and poverty. Life for them has basically ended when Elijah and Jesus show up. These women both stand at the gates of their towns in despair when they encounter these great men. Thus far, the stories work in complete parallel to each other; they diverge some in how the two prophets react to the deaths before them.

Elijah's **reaction** is to take the widow of Zarephath's son from her; she is clinging her son's dead body to her. Elijah takes the boy up to his room, lays him on the bed, and cries out to God. This cry is more a complaint-"God, you've brought calamity upon this widow with whom I am staying"-than a plea for resuscitation. Elijah then stretches his body out over the child three times. In so doing, he is stretching love over suffering. Perhaps this is some ancient healing ritual; scholars are unsure on this. God at least takes notice, and revives the child. The widow, upon receiving her revived child, proclaims that Elijah is a prophet of God. This single mom has been given her life back, both emotionally and fiscally, in the renewed life of her child.

Jesus' **reaction** at the gate with the widow of Nain, is to truly see her. Most people in ancient Israel wouldn't 'see' a single mother

struggling to survive in a culture with no safety net. Jesus not only sees her, he sees her with compassion. This is the author of Luke's distinctive touch in this story; surely Elijah did have compassion, but the 1 Kings story doesn't tell us so. In Luke, we hear explicitly that Jesus suffers with the woman. The Greek word for compassion is *splagchnizomai*. The noun base root of the word refers to the intestines or entrails. Rendered in English the translation would be something like: "to feel someone's pain in your gut, in the pit of your stomach." Now we actually medically know that our stomach and intestines contain receptors for emotions. The ancients weren't too far off, then, to associate feeling for someone in your gut as compassion. Jesus looked at the widow and felt her pain to the pit of his stomach.

In response, he doesn't take her son to his body and lay him down and stretch over him as did Elijah. He touches the stretcher upon which her son's body lay, and he speaks a word. His authoritative word shows the power of Jesus—a power that was also shown in the healing of the centurion's slave from our story last week. The author of the gospel of Luke wants to show that Jesus is greater than even the prophet Elijah; a prophet whose word alone revives because the word is God. Jesus requires no further intervention; his word is Gospel. In response to Jesus' word, the man sits up alive. The

crowd, in contrast to just the widow in the Elijah story, proclaims that Jesus is a prophet and that God is with the people.

Thus, the author of Luke takes the Elijah story, and turns it into an occasion to proclaim Jesus' compassion and the power of Jesus' word over death. In Jesus, death, compassion, and resurrection are intimately connected. In Luke's version, Jesus offers compassion without the widow saying anything, doing anything, earning anything. Jesus meets her in her pain, meets her in the pain in his own gut. The mother didn't have to be faithful, to believe, to be grateful. She just received the compassion of Jesus into her life. That compassion transformed death into life, and she hugged that life of her son with all her might. This resurrection of her son foreshadows Jesus' own resurrection, in which he will die as an act of compassion for us, and be raised from the dead in order to triumph over death for us. The resurrection of Jesus then provides the basis for our own hope of resurrection (1 Corinthians 15).

The story of the widow and her experience of death, Jesus' compassion, and resurrection then becomes our own story and our own hope. A few of you here have been like the widow; you have lost a child. Upon you in your grief that never fully goes away, Jesus looks at you with compassion. Though God did not raise your dead child back to life, our Christian hope teaches us that your child, and you

yourself, will be raised through Christ's resurrection. We have hope that you will indeed see and hold your child again through the power of the gospel.

Most all of us here, even if we haven't experienced the depth of the grief of the death of a child, have experienced death in our lives—if we're old enough. You've experienced the death of a loved one—perhaps still you hold that grief. Christ looks upon you with the depth of compassion, feeling for you in his gut. Jesus' word to you most likely won't raise your loved one from the dead, but that word can raise you from your grief into new life.

Death in our life can be also many other things besides the stopping of the heart and breath; we can experience lots of encounters with deadening events in life. The widow's son on that stretcher could represent the loss of a job, the loss of a home, challenges with a child or parent, single parenthood, an addiction, cancer, the death of a dream, the death of a relationship. When Jesus sees you on whatever stretcher upon which you are lying, he looks at you with deep compassion. Our very God who created this earth aches with you to the pit of God's stomach. He suffers with you. He sees you. Then God touches that stretcher that is carrying your loss, and says, "I say to you, rise." Out of whatever loss you may be in God can bring new life, can bring resurrection.

This image of Jesus' compassion, and then Christ's word within us to bring resurrection out of dead places in our lives is so powerful to me. Experiencing my marriage on that stretcher has been the most grief-filled and devastating event of my life. In the depth of my suffering, in the very midst of my heartbreak and feelings of betrayal Jesus has and is looking at me with compassion; Christ feels my hurt and pain to the depth of his entrails, just as I do. Jesus touches that stretcher, and offers the word, "I say to you, rise!" I trust that out of such death in my own life, resurrection truly comes. I wish new life came as quickly as it did for the young man in the text; for me living into Christ's resurrection will be a journey, a story much longer than a verse. It's going to take me months, and maybe even years, before I can fully sit up and step down off of that stretcher. I trust and pray with all my heart that I will rise, though, through the power of Jesus' word.

For those of you who right now, by the grace of God, aren't on a stretcher, this text charges you to be Christ's compassion to those who are. Thank you to so many of you for being Christ's compassion to me during this devastating time. Several of you have shared your story surviving through divorce. I found a beautiful bouquet on the desk one Sunday after enduring through a distressing morning at home. You have been Elijah stretching out and covering me. You have been

Jesus praying for me and living out the gospel. Thank you for being such a compassionate church.

For those of you who right now, by the grace of God, aren't on a stretcher, this text charges you to be Christ's compassion not only to me, but to all who grieve. For the jobless, the addict, the homeless, the depressed, the mentally ill. . .

Particularly, this text calls us to tend to the deep vulnerability of single mothers in this country—a vulnerability with which I myself can now identify. Like those widows in Israel, single moms in America have little to no safety net. Yet, according to a recent Pew study, four out of ten families in America now rely primarily on the income of a woman. A significant majority of those households are single mother households living in poverty. If that mother breadwinner has a sick child and must miss work to care for him, and then her employer fires her, she must choose between healthcare costs for her child or expensive childcare if she wants to find work again--and paying the rent or buying food. These are not viable choices. Single mothers with children make up the largest percentage of America's homeless because of unjust societal structures. Sociologist Susan Crawford Sullivan has just published a new book called *Living Faith: Everyday Religion and Mothers in Poverty*. She studied women in shelters, and writes about a mother named Rebecca who prays and reads the Bible

with her children every night in the shelter. Rebecca goes to church, but feels ashamed. As Christians we are called to meet single moms like Rebecca at their gates of desperation, just as Elijah and Jesus did, and really see them with compassion. Even more, we are called to give those lying dead on stretchers the gospel—a Word from Jesus that encompasses deeds of charity as well. We Christians are to usher those on stretchers into new life, into the resurrection. To those of us dead in whatever way on a stretcher, Jesus comes to us (hopefully in the form of a Christian brother and sister) sees us with compassion that goes all the way down to the gut, and says, “I say to you rise.” May we all, whether on a stretcher or reaching out to touch it, have the courage to practice resurrection. Amen.