

Luke 7:1-17 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Jesus Heals a Centurion's Servant

7 After Jesus^[a] had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ² A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. ³ When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. ⁴ When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, ⁵ for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." ⁶ 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; ⁷ therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸ 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." ⁹ When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." ¹⁰ When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

Jesus Raises the Widow's Son at Nain

¹¹ Soon afterwards^[b] he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. ¹² 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. ¹³ When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." ¹⁴ Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" ¹⁵ The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus^[c] gave him to his mother. ¹⁶ Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" ¹⁷ This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

February 5, 2017, Sermon Text by Pastor Esther Lee

It has been a while since I watched any television other than the news. However, as I was preparing for the sermon for today, I remembered a show that I watched regularly years ago called, "What would you do?" Every episode, the show took different issues to the streets by experimenting different situations that caused conflict, soliciting response from bystanders. One of the episodes I watched really hit me in the heart and I still remember it even though it has been at least 5 years since I watched it. The episode centered on the people's responses to someone who collapsed on the street. First section of the show was their experiment of having a young woman dressed in a business outfit collapse on the street. How did the people on the street respond? They immediately ran to her to help her get up. People from behind her, in front of her and even across the street came to help her asking her "are you alright?" and called 911 for her. Second section of the show featured a middle aged man dressed in a suit who collapsed on the street. In the same way the people responded to a young woman in distress, the people came to help this man regain consciousness and assisted him in whatever he needed. On the last segment of the show, they featured a man in dingy clothes with a liquor bottle in his hand who collapsed on the street. People passed by this collapsed man, taking several glances, some shaking their heads, some smiling, and some who purposely took steps away from the collapsed man to avoid him. The host of the show reported that for 15-30 minutes, the man laid on the street with heavy foot traffic with no one to help him. What

would you do? When was the last time you had compassion for someone or a group of persons?

This scripture passage is so appropriate as it calls attention to the condition of our hearts as we live in such a time as this: A time when fear and anxiety of the unknown dictates action, when priority of life highlights “For us, for me!” when arms reach inward in greed instead of reaching out with aide, and decisions are made to lock the doors and the walls constructed against refugees fleeing for their lives, when bridges are threatened to be burned for immigrants and asylum seekers, and extensive amount of money is being planned to be used to exclude people and groups of people instead of loving and caring for those in need. Segregation is not over, diversity is unwelcomed, and division is still being implemented in our world. I believe that today’s scripture gives us a great example of how to live in these times and what we should pray for.

So in the first section of the scriptures for today tells the story of the Centurion, equivalent of a sergeant-major who were the backbone of the Roman army who asks Jesus to heal his slave. What I want us to take note of in this text is the particularity of this Centurion.

This Centurion was no ordinary man. In his high rank and authority, he had an unusual attitude toward his slave. The Roman law defined slaves as living tools: with no rights, a master could ill-treat him and even kill him if he chooses. A commentary tells of a Roman writer on estate management recommending that farmers examine his equipment every year and to throw out those which are old and broken, to do the same with his slaves. Normally when a slave was past his work he was thrown out to die. The attitude of this centurion to his slave was quite unusual.

He also had an extremely unusual attitude to the Jews- If the Jews despised the gentiles, the gentiles hated the Jews. It is true that many gentiles, weary of the many gods, and loose morals of paganism, had accepted the Jewish doctrine of the one God and the Jewish ethics. But this Centurion was clearly unusual that he not only tolerated the Jewish faith as other had just to keep the peace, he himself was religious in that he was more than just interested in the religion as he made an effort in having the synagogue built.

He knew quiet well that a strict Jew was forbidden by the law to enter the house of a gentile, just as a Jew was forbidden to allow a gentile into their house or have any communication with them. Knowing this law and in keeping that law which was not really his to abide by, he respected that law that he would not even come to Jesus himself. But not only that, he recognized the authority of Jesus as a man who was accustomed to authority and had an amazing humility in the presence of true greatness.

In short, as the scriptures tell us, this centurion had faith and was humble. Even deeper than that, this scripture implies that this centurion was the bridge between his Roman culture and the Jewish religion, and he had deep concern for his slave, enough to make him act in an unusual, ambitious, courageous way. He knew he couldn’t do anything but Jesus was able. He knew he had all the power in the world but Jesus had more.

In the second section of today’s scriptures we have Jesus going into a town called Nain, close to Nazareth, his home town. There his crew and his entourage is met by a crowd of the townspeople who were mourning and grieving with a widow he had just lost her only son. There Jesus performed the first miracle of raising the dead.

From first glance, this story seems to be a classic story of Jesus’ miracle, but there are particularities in this story to take note of. Here, no one asked Jesus to perform this miracle like all the other stories where he did so. He also did not have any communication with the widow

but he acted on his own terms, motivated solely on his own terms. He was not expected to perform this miracle, and he surely didn't have to. However, he was overcome by his own heart of compassion. Jesus knew that this widow had lost her husband and her only son, both who were the only ones who can provide for her living. The scripture tells us that Jesus decided to "see" the widow and was overwhelmed by compassion in his heart, so much that he could not ignore the pain and sorrow of the widow's heart, he had to do something about it... to raise her son from the dead.

What is compassion? The Greek word for compassion finds its root from the word meaning "intestines", which means it is a feeling that comes from deep within. I have also read in a commentary which describes compassion as close to the feeling of "bowel movement", a feeling one cannot ignore and it calls for immediate action. Have you felt overwhelmed by compassion in your heart lately?

When one is overcome with compassion like Jesus and the Centurion, one steps out of their cultural norms, expands their "so called" religious bounds, national boundaries, and escape their own world's traditions for the sake of those in need. And when the procession of tragedy, death, and mourning meets the compassion and hope of Jesus Christ, and the miracle of new, restorative life happens, the experience of the resurrection power of Christ.

Compassion is not a feeling that comes from someone well off for those who are of lesser resources. That would be charity. The dictionary simply defines compassion as empathy, a feeling of distress and pity for the suffering or misfortune of another. However, as a follower of Christ, I venture to say that true compassion is found in the life of Christ. The Spiritual author and Catholic priest Henri Nouwen describes Jesus' life of compassion as the path of "downward mobility" as Jesus chooses pain, rejection, persecution, and death rather than "upward mobility" toward power, authority, influence, and wealth. Dr Michal Beth Dinkler, a professor of New Testament at Yale Divinity School suggests that "Jesus did not reach down to lift up the poor up from above. He became poor and suffered with, that the path of downward mobility differs from the common notion today that compassion means helping 'those less fortunate than we are'. Healing those in need by volunteering in a soup kitchen or donating money to help is labeled as being compassionate but this also is problematic that it is somehow from someone with more to someone with less, still a very top reaching down, the powerful towards the powerless. However, true compassion as exemplified in Jesus is not about effectiveness, impressing others, or to have success. It is to suffer with the powerless.'

So the most shocking part of the show I spoke about in my introduction... After 30 minutes of laying on the street, who came to help the man who was in dingy clothing with a bottle in his hand? It was a homeless man who was walking on the street.

So it is the theme of the gospel of Luke, the importance of seeing, that like Jesus who took time to see the widow in her pain before he acted, and like the centurion who acted boldly in his compassion for his slave, it is my prayer for us all today and every day that we take time to see with the eyes of compassion and to feel with those who are suffering.