

Third Sunday after Pentecost
Galatians 1:11-24, Psalm 146, Luke 7:11-17
June 5, 2016
David Teschner

“Soon after healing the centurion’s slave, Jesus went to a city called Nain....” Remember last week how a Roman soldier asked for Jesus’ help to heal his sick slave? Jesus did it without even seeing the sick person because the soldier’s faith in him was so strong and absolute.

In contrast, today Jesus heals a woman’s broken heart without her asking by bringing her only son back to life, and there is absolutely no mention of faith on anyone’s part.

If last week, Jesus is driven by the soldier’s faith, this week Jesus is driven by his own compassion for a bereaved widow.

Someone has said that the difference between sympathy and compassion is that sympathy is a feeling while compassion is an action. This morning in our gospel story, Jesus doesn’t wait for someone to ask for his help nor for someone to believe in his power to heal. Jesus sees a tragic situation and acts.

The Greek word used here for compassion literally means “a churning of one’s entrails” or a gut-wrenching sensation. One feels sick to his stomach. The Greek word has its root in the word for a woman’s womb. Compassion could then be compared to the fierce love a mother has for a child in her womb.

All of this is to say that it is a very strong, internal and spontaneous response to a condition of pain and suffering. Women probably experience it more than men because we males have been socialized to be strong and deny feelings that render us vulnerable or weak.

In the 49th chapter of the prophetic book of Isaiah, Judah, the nation now in exile in Babylon, speaks and says, “The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.” Through the prophet, the Lord God replies to this cry of anguish, “Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these will forget, yet I will not forget you.” (Isaiah 49: 15 -16a) Here, the God of Israel, Judah and Jesus clearly identify with a woman and that incredible bond she feels for her child before and after birth.

It’s probably fair to say that we have all lost to some extent our capacity for compassion because we are confronted with so much suffering every day through the around-the-clock and around-the-world news coverage available to us. We are hardly moved by more mass drownings in the Mediterranean Sea, another senseless shooting spree, murder-suicide, or fatal crash because they are all so frequent.

I don't blame this on the media, but on people's insatiable appetite for more and more news coverage. There is a remedy – limit the amount of reporting you expose yourself to and watch more wholesome broadcasting. As I have said before, if you want to observe pure compassion, watch, buy, rent or stream the Public Television series, "Call the Midwife."

Another strategy to soften hearts that have become hard, numb, and resistant or indifferent to the deluge of suffering and violence is to take a little time to put yourself in the place of the sufferers. For example, imagine for a moment what it would be like to have to flee your home and country due to war, live in an overcrowded refugee camp, or board an over-loaded and rickety boat, the only means of possible survival for yourself and your children.

To do that is hardly bearable, but by doing so we might restore or preserve our humanity and be reminded that we are all God's children. Most people everywhere want the same things we want, and God wants for them all the same things that we enjoy.

True compassion would then entail finding a way to help alleviate people's suffering even if only in a small way.

Let me suggest another exercise that might prove helpful as well. As I said at the beginning, the widow in the gospel story today didn't ask for Jesus' help and probably could not have imagined that her dire situation could change. Without a male relative, she had few options for economic viability.

Maybe you are facing an actual difficulty or at least imagine one in your near future. The situation is scary or sad and/or causing you to be angry and frustrated too much of the time. Like the poor widow you are consumed and overwhelmed by the prospect of an uncertain future.

In a quiet and prayerful moment, set aside some time to imagine that Jesus is literally walking into the middle of your particular situation. Maybe he speaks to you and maybe he touches you. What does he say? Is it what you want to hear or not? Can he assure you that with his presence you can get through your situation together? Does he give you hope for a different future? Will something new rise up for you?

I want to end with a short poem by Ann Weems. I believe it is the voice of compassion. I want to read it through twice. This first time listen to it as Jesus' voice of compassion speaking directly to you.

I see your pain

and I want to banish it.

I see your tears and I want to dry them.

*I am the one God sends to sit beside you,
until the stars come out
and the angels dry your tears
and your heart is back in place.*

This second time listen to the same poem as your own voice of compassion speaking to a fellow traveler on this rollercoaster journey through life.

*I see your pain
and I want to banish it.
I see your tears and I want to dry them.*

*I am the one God sends to sit beside you,
until the stars come out
and the angels dry your tears
and your heart is back in place.*

May our Lord both comfort us and use us to comfort others. AMEN.