

THE COMPASSION OF CHRIST

A SERMON FOR THE SEASON OF PENTECOST
SUNDAY, JUNE 9, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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LUKE 7:11-17

When we left Jesus, He had just healed the slave of a Roman centurion, almost by “remote control”, certainly from a distance.

He had been at Capernaum, a fishing village by the Sea of Galilee. Now He is moving on to the even smaller village of Nain, close to the border between Galilee and Judea, southeast of Nazareth. When you look for Nain on the map, you will conclude that Nain is not a place that anyone would be passing through on the way to somewhere else. You’ve got to be going there to get there. And notice, it doesn’t say that Jesus was passing through Nain. The text is plain: He went there.

His timing was perfect. Jesus arrived at the gates of the village just as a funeral procession was coming out, headed to the local cemetery. No burials were allowed within the walls of a town or city under Jewish law, so they were headed to the graveyard to inter the mortal remains of a widow’s only son.

The son is described as a man. A man who had died. No wife and children appear in the story as mourners. His principal mourner and apparent sole survivor is his mother.

I have come to realize after nearly forty-five years of presiding at funerals that the worst grief a person, particularly a mother, can feel, is the death of a child. And it doesn’t matter how old that child is, that child is still a mother’s baby, her beloved.

I remember sitting with a woman in her eighties, whose son, Eugene, had retired just a few months previously after a long career with the Publix grocery store chain. Eugene was in his sixties, a grandfather several times over himself. As I sat with his mother, waiting on her daughter and son-in-law to come and be with her, she wept almost uncontrollably, and said to me, when she had caught her breath,

“He was my child. It wouldn’t hurt any more if he’d been a three year old run over by a car while riding his tricycle. He was my baby. I know he was an old man, and I know he’d had a good life, and I know he’s going to heaven, but he’s my baby and it hurts.”

For the widow of Nain, that was the hurt that she felt.

Parents, mothers and fathers, aren’t supposed to bury their children. Children are supposed to bury their parents.

But in the time of Jesus, for a widow to lose her only son was a double tragedy. There was no such thing as life insurance, or a widow’s pension, or social security. Her son represented her financial security. She was in exactly the same state as Naomi in the Old Testament, who changed her name from Naomi (sweetness) to Mara (bitterness) after the death of her two sons.

She was right there with the widow of Zarepath, who told the prophet that she was going to bake a little cake and eat it and die.

There was no hope, no future, for a childless widow. She might wind up like Anna, the prophetess who haunted the temple around the time of the birth of Jesus, or she might wind up begging beside the road like a leper, but she was bereft not only emotionally but financially by the death of her son.

The son and his mother must have been beloved by the town, for a large crowd accompanied them on the way to the cemetery.

When Jesus saw her, we read that He had compassion for her, and told her not to weep, and then touched not the body but the bier, the litter, upon which her son was being carried to the graveyard, and simply spoke to him saying, "Young man, I say to you, rise!"

The dead man sat up. And began to talk.

What does that message mean to us today?

Does it mean if we weep and wail, the Christ will have compassion on us, and return to life one who is dead?

I think not.

Instead, I think that the promise of the Resurrection, the hope of eternal life, the assurance that in Christ all shall be made alive transforms our grief, our sorrow, so that we can never be as bereft as that mother was. We will feel the loss. But we know it is not a loss for time and eternity. We know that the separation is only temporary. We know we shall see each other again. We know that Jesus Christ not only has compassion for us in our sorrow, He has the power over life and death that transforms our grief into a celebration of hope.

Listen to what Paul wrote in I Thessalonians 4: "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so through Jesus, God will bring with Jesus those who have died." (verses 13-15)

The compassion of Christ is not a one time on the road to the village of Nain experience. We experience it every time someone we know dies, and we find comfort in the words of scripture. We know that nothing can separate us from the love of God, in Jesus Christ our Lord, and that list in Romans 8 includes life and death.

Old William Barclay, the Scots Bible commentator, claimed in his old age to have become a Universalist, to have come to believe that everybody would be saved, that everyone would somehow make it in to heaven.

I'm not there yet, but I believe in the grace of God, and I believe in the compassion of Christ, and I believe that those who call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

I've told this story before, and if you've heard it, it won't hurt you to listen again.

Years ago, when I was serving as a hospital chaplain in West Virginia, I got a call out one Saturday afternoon. A man with a gunshot wound was en route to the hospital in an automobile from one of the remote communities up the Gauley River.

When that Chrysler Cordoba pulled into the driveway, the fine Corinthian leather of the front seat was white, but the back seat was a rich, deep, red from the blood the wounded man had lost.

The two men from the front seat pulled him out of the car before the ER nurses could get to him, and half-dragged half carried him through the double doors. Just as he got inside the hospital, the man took a big breath, and uttered the words, "O Lord, help me!"

Despite the best efforts of the staff at the hospital, he died in the Emergency Room.

A couple of weeks later, I had a call from a woman. She asked if I was the chaplain at the hospital. I told her that I was. She asked if she could meet with me that afternoon. I agreed. We met in my little cubby hole of an office at the hospital, and she came in red of eyes, pale of face, disheveled in appearance. She told me that her son had died in the emergency room a week or two before. She told me that he had been shot by his brother-in-law.

She said,

"My son was a violent, brutal, man. He was an angry drunk, and on that Saturday, he had been drinking non-stop since he got off from work on Friday. He beat his brother-in-law to a bloody pulp, and then turned to pick up an axe. That's when my son-in-law picked up a shotgun and shot my son."

She said, "Chaplain, I can't sleep at night, thinking about my son. Can you offer me any hope?"

I told her, "All I can say is that his last words were, "O Lord, help me!"

She smiled through her tears as she said, "That's enough! He called out to the Lord for help. That's enough."

That woman left that little office having encountered the compassion of Christ. She trusted in the compassion of Christ. She believed in the compassion of Christ.

I don't know whether she'll see her son in heaven or not, but I do know that for the rest of her days on this earth, she lives in that hope, because of the compassion of Christ.

Let us pray.

O Lord, help us to always trust in your compassion, to always believe in your compassion, Help us to feel your compassion in our hearts, and to show it to others, that they may come to know the compassion of Christ through us. In your name we pray. Amen.