Sermon copyright © 2013 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Pentecost 5C
Peace, Seattle
June 9, 2013
Luke 7:11-17

THE PARTICULARITY OF COMPASSION

I got the call from the lead chaplain in the early afternoon. A father—who had fallen asleep watching a movie with his wife and daughter the night before—could not be aroused when morning came. His wife had summoned aid, but it was no use…by the time the medics arrived he was too far gone.

Now the medical examiner was at the scene and I was to go and be with the family.

Soon after I arrived, a woman approached the house and it took but a moment to see that she was the deceased man's mother. Her face was contorted with anguish; her eyes, darting and probing, were wells for tears.

Reaching the house, she saw in our faces confirmation of her worst fear, and she collapsed into my arms wailing—**"My baby! My baby!"**

That her son was nearly 40 meant nothing to her; only that he <u>was</u> her son, <u>he</u> was her baby.

Grieving mothers, and the specter of death haunt two of our stories this morning.
But unlike the scene I encountered that day, in <u>these</u> stories grief is transformed into joy as the power of God to heal—to save, is manifested, first through Elijah, and then, in Jesus.

With the sparest of words, Luke tells us how Jesus, approaching the gate of a town, comes face to face with a funeral procession. A dead man is being carried out on a bier, and there can be no mistaking the primal sound pouring out from the mother who has just lost her son.[1]

Two griefs mingle within her: the grief of knowing that her only son is no more; and the grief of knowing that, without him, her <u>own</u> future is forfeit.

Bereft first of her husband, and now her son, there is no mechanism to keep her from falling into poverty's iron grasp. No social security, no insurance policy, no pension or other safety net will stop her downward spiral toward obscurity and anonymity, hunger, homelessness and eventually death.

Jesus, perceiving all this; hearing, perhaps, her gut-wrenching wail, is filled with compassion.

DO NOT WEEP! he calls to her; and coming alongside the bier, he puts out his hand and brings the whole procession to a halt. All eyes are fixed on him now.

YOUNG MAN— he cries—I SAY TO YOU, RISE!

And with those words, the eyes that were fixed on Jesus, shift their gaze to the bier and watch with fear and awe as the man whose life had ended sits up, finds his voice, and is given back to his mother. Death's sentence is suspended; the future that was closed is open.

What are we to make of this story, and other miracle stories like it in the gospels?

[1] M. Jan Holton, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol. 3.* (Louisville:Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) p.116.

Sermon copyright © 2013 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Are they to be taken as factual, historical occurrences in which the laws of physics as we know them are suspended?

Or are they first and foremost theological stories designed to portray theological truths in existential clothing?

This particular story is unique to Luke; none of the other gospels have it. And in it Luke makes a point to telling us how great the crowd was which accompanied Jesus that day, witnessing this miracle.

As these stories of Jesus' power to heal multiply and spread, disciples of John the Baptist will soon come to Jesus to ask: ARE YOU THE ONE, OR ARE WE TO WAIT FOR ANOTHER?

And how will Jesus respond?

GO AND TELL JOHN WHAT YOU HAVE SEEN AND HEARD:
THE BLIND RECEIVE THEIR SIGHT, THE LAME WALK, THE LEPERS ARE CLEANSED,
THE DEAF HEAR, THE DEAD ARE RAISED, THE POOR HAVE GOOD NEWS BROUGHT TO THEM. AND BLESSED IS ANYONE WHO TAKES NO OFFENSE AT ME.

Are these stories, then, emblematic parables pointing to the fullness of God's presence in Jesus?

I suspect that if we surveyed the room right now, we would find a variety of opinions regarding how these stories are to be understood.

But one thing is certain; which ever way we come down on the question of miracles, today's story reveals to us a God who, in Jesus, longs to be present to us in the most desperate, helpless, hopeless moments of our lives, working to bring joy out of sorrow and life out of death.

Sometimes that journey from sorrow to joy can turn on a dime; but more often, transformation has a much longer gestation period.

The New Testament word Luke uses for compassion here—*splanchnizomai*—locates compassion deep in Jesus' belly. To have compassion for someone is to feel for them deeply, in your gutyou're your bowels, even, to have a womb for them.

That's what happened for Elijah, too, when the woman who'd become his source of sustenance finds her only son at death's door.

"What have you against me, O man of God," she cried, "You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!"

In the face of calamity, God often gets the blame. And Elijah seems ready to do so, too, at first, before appealing to God for the life of the child.

But God hears Elijah's plea, and through him the boy is revived, and is given back to his mother.

In a world in which crises of all sorts have the potential to deeply challenge—and sometimes shatter—us, we need reminding that God is not out to get us, but rather, in Jesus, is determined to come alongside us, holding us as closely and deeply and wholly as a woman holds the child of her womb.

Sermon copyright © 2013 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

What's more, Jesus shows us that, where God is concerned, there is no such thing as "generic" love. Christ doesn't love the world in general, he loves the world in specific—this boy, this woman, this blind man, this leper, this beloved child—Ruth, Loretta, Ted, Siri, Louisa…each one of us.

Moved by what he encounters, Jesus acts to restore life, bringing healing and hope into particular lives, in particular places.

For Christ knows the circumstances of your life and mine; knows the histories of our families. He knows where are struggles lie: what our doctors are telling us; knows our struggling relationships; the dead-end habits and addictions that threaten our futures.

He takes those oft' times fragile histories and tentative futures into his compassionate hands and holds them to his heart, and says, "Be not afraid." I will raise you up—even as I was raised!

Yes, our Lord knows us, each one, and he yearns for us—YEARNS!—that we receive his deep embrace so we will be filled to overflowing with compassion for one another.

At the end of the day, these stories pointing out Christ's compassion for us become invitations, you see, for us to imitate him.

And after coming to the Table today, coming to be fed, that's exactly what he'll be equipping us to do as we leave this place. We become the compassion of Christ. We go about the ministry of Christ, reaching out not with generic ideals but to specific persons, with specific names and faces, griefs and hopes.

Where death threatens, God provides.

"God is at work in all of our territories," writes Rebecca Gaudino, "even in our most dangerous and deathly places." [2]

Let us pray:
Compassionate God, we long for healing in our lives and in the lives of those we love—physical, emotional, spiritual. Increase our trust in you, and sustain us this day and each day, with the faith that you will never leave us or forsake us. Fill us with compassion for each other, and the courage to walk beside one another, knowing that, because of you, death will not be the final word. Amen.

[2] Rebecca Kruger Gaudino, *New Proclamation 2007* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), p. 95.