

The Life-giving Power of Compassion

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab
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A person once asked me, “Which would you rather do, a wedding or a funeral?” I think my answer surprised him, because I said, “I’d really much rather do funerals than weddings.”

That doesn’t mean I look forward more to people dying than to people getting married. But, you see, at weddings most people (not *all*, but *most*, especially the bride and groom) are a lot more focused on what’s going to happen *after* the wedding than they are on what’s happening *during* the ceremony. The minds of the happy couple and their friends are on the party, the fun, the honeymoon, and all they have to look forward to. I do my best to get their attention, but with many it doesn’t work. However, at a funeral, the priest is looking at a family, and sometimes a whole church full of people, hungry for an experience that might help them deal with the pain they’re feeling and give them strength to face a future that no longer seems very bright .

Wherever Jesus went, he drew a crowd. Some people adored him and wanted to be near him all the time. Others despised him and wanted to heckle him. And there were many who were just curious about him. He was a most unusual man, so they wanted to hear what he might say and see what he might do. Therefore, when Jesus went walking from town to town he was usually surrounded by people.

One day when Jesus and his entourage of disciples, admirers, and critics came into the little town of Nain they were met by another crowd of people going the other way, heading out the town gate. This was a funeral procession.

Now, Jesus and the others might have simply stopped and stood politely at the side of the road and let the funeral procession go by, on its way out to the cemetery – the way we do on the highway when a hearse comes along, driving slowly, followed by a line of cars with their lights on. And that’s probably what most of the people around him did — but not Jesus.

Jesus watched the funeral procession, and he could tell in a flash what was happening. There was a dead body, being carried out on a plank, as was the custom with the poor. And following the body, there was a weeping woman – dressed in the customary garb of a widow. Burials always took place on the day of the death, so the woman was in the fresh anguish of grief. She was leaning on a couple of other women from the village and surrounded by many sympathetic friends. He could see no children with her, and the body on the bier was too slight to be that of an older man. Her traditional widow’s dress told him: Here is a woman taking out the body of her only son for burial.

Our gospel tells us that when Jesus saw the brokenhearted, bereaved mother “*he had compassion for her.*” The original language is more graphic; it says “*he was moved with gut-wrenching feeling for her.*” But *compassion* is still a good word for that. He called out, maybe from the roadside, to the poor woman and said, “*Oh, don’t cry!*” (What could be more “gut-wrenching” than to hear the cries of a mother in the midst of such a loss as hers?)

Jesus left the respectful throng standing by the road and went out and stopped the procession. He put his hand on the plank where the dead body of the woman’s son was lying and said simply, “*Young man, I say to you, be raised.*” The boy sat up, alive, and began to speak. And Luke says that Jesus “*gave him back to his mother.*” The crowd was awe-struck. With their own eyes they had just seen the power of God at work among them, just as in the days of Elijah, and they ran to spread word about the miracle far and wide. But we’re not told anything else: not about anyone coming to faith, not about the woman or the boy being grateful. Nothing else, only this: “*He gave him back to his mother.*”

There have been many times when I wished that I could open a casket right in the midst of a funeral in the church and call the dead back to life. There are stories in Africa and South America and the Philippines about wonder-working preachers who do just that. Maybe they do. There are lots of those stories.

But the thing that touches me most about this event is Jesus' *compassion* for the mourning widow. It's the first thing the gospel-writer tells us about, and it's really the main point. He was "*deeply moved*" when he saw her, when he beheld her tears, when he recognized her loneliness. She probably had no idea who he was, and the other people in Nain were as much in the dark as she was. They might have heard tales of the miracle-working prophet called Jesus of Nazareth, but they had no idea that this was he. Certainly the weeping woman had no faith, no expectation that this stranger at the roadside could help her. She was absorbed in her own pain. —But Jesus had compassion for her.

Compassion is a powerful emotion, but it's more than that. Compassion is a practice that can truly be life-giving.

All the great religions describe *compassion* as one of the main attributes of God and a quality to be found in holy people. But can we teach people how to show compassion? Is there a way we might learn how to become more compassionate people ourselves? I get lots of mail advertising video courses and books I could buy to use in classes at church. But I've never seen one called "*Six Weeks to a More Compassionate Me.*" There are no "how-to" books on compassion that I've seen, and no short courses being offered out at Colorado Mountain College.

Compassion is a gift. I believe that. Faith is a gift, too. But there are things we can do to deepen our faith, and I believe there *are* things we can do to deepen our capacity to experience and practice compassion. Here are three steps we can take.

The first is to learn how to *be more sensitive to the people around us.* Stop, and look around; take notice of others. So often we're oblivious to what's going on with people we may see all the time, much less strangers on the street. We're wrapped up in ourselves, our plans, and our own emotional state. So, we don't notice the tears; we don't sense the sadness; we don't perceive the pain that might be there in people around us. Or, if we do notice, we don't feel able to do anything about it. We don't let it "get to us" because we don't want it to. We tell ourselves, "It's their problem; I shouldn't get involved. That would be intrusive." So we shake our heads sympathetically and then go on about our business. We'd rather be polite and respect the other person's privacy (and thus remain free to pursue our own plans) than get involved in the practice of a kind of compassion that might side-track our agenda for the day — "*Oh, I'm so sorry! But, hey, I really do have to run. Let's talk some time, OK? See ya.*"

That leads to the second step: *deciding to act.* Compassion is more than just "feeling sorry" for someone else. It involves *doing something* to help. Emotions come and go. But compassion, like faith, involves an act of the will. Compassion is not just a feeling; it's a decision. Jesus could have watched the weeping mother following the body of her boy out to his shallow grave and been moved to shed a few tears of his own. No doubt he did think about his own mother and how sad she would be if something happened to him (as it soon would). His attention could then have shifted to himself and his own mother and away from the grieving woman in the road and her dead son. But he kept his focus on this sorrowful woman. He felt what she was feeling. Then he *acted*. He didn't merely "feel;" he decided to *do* something.

The third step in this process is to *be fully aware of our resources – both spiritual and material – and bring those resources to bear in the encounter.* Jesus did what only *he* could do. He stopped the funeral procession and raised the young man from death to life. You and I might not be able to work miracles like that, but God has given us other gifts to offer that have their own life-giving dimensions. For example, we can scrap our personal plans for the day and take a hurting person aside with us to a place where we can listen to her story and pray for her. Or we can give the protection and security of our presence to someone who's terrified. Sometimes all a person needs is for us to say, as Jesus so often did, "Don't be afraid. I'm going to stay with you." And, simplest of all, we can open our checkbook and say to a person who's about to give up hope, "Here, let me take care of that for you," and pay their debts.

If we want to be like Jesus – and I believe all disciples want to be like the Master – we want to be people of compassion. Remember: compassion is not just a feeling; it's a decision.