

Proper 5C  
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St. Paul's - Peoria, IL  
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At my last parish, I had the opportunity to travel to El Salvador twice. As most people will tell you, visiting a developing country for the first time can be incredibly overwhelming. The poverty is on a level we just do not see in our country. We were welcomed into lean-to shacks, from the side of the Pan-American highway to rural swamps. Every day, these communities faced everything from landslides to bad harvests to governments forcing them off of their land. But what really affected me, especially on my first visit only eight months after my dad was killed in a car accident, was the incredible precariousness of life. We visited a wall listing of the dead and the disappeared from the war - huge numbers in a small country. And when we visited, although the war was over, the number of people who were murdered each day was the same as those who died each day in the war.

And yet that was not the largest cause of death - gastro-intestinal illness from unclean water and car accidents claimed those spots. How they continued to live with the combination of economic instability and violent, sudden death was hard for me to comprehend. When I read about the widows in today's passages, it reminded me of the people of El Salvador.

The link between today's passages from the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospel is fairly obvious - they both include a widow whose only son has just died. Can you imagine the pain? Not only have they lost their spouse; they now have lost a child as well. The grief seems unimaginable.

And yet, in both of these situations, the grief is only part of the tragedy. A woman in the ancient world was entirely dependent on the men she was related to for financial security - that is where she would live or where her next meal would come from. Typically, a woman was dependent on her husband, but if he died and left a male heir, then the son would become responsible for the mother and she would be saved. But for both of these widows, their only son dies, and with them, any tie to security.

Taking care of widows was a deeply-held value in Jewish culture - over and over in Scripture, we are told to care for the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner. Taking care of these people was a mark of holiness in a society - and Scripture is clear that failure to do so is sinful, a mark of a society whose values are not in line with God. The reason that this is so incredibly important is because they were the most vulnerable of their society - people without a way to make a living to secure food and shelter, and without anyone obligated to do that for them.

So it is possible that these woman would be taken care of out of the charity and kindness of their people - but they would be dependent on their charity. They would be among the most vulnerable - dependent completely on the whims of others, on them acting lovingly and faithfully. Just like today, when shortage and famine came, they would be the first to feel it because people will care for their own loved ones first. Their lives would be precarious. With their sons died not only the hopes and dreams for their child, but also their place in society and the possibility of any life more than subsistence.

But for both of these women, miraculously, this is not the end of their story. For both of them, someone notices and does something as unimaginable as their suffering.

Elijah cries out to God for the plight of the woman. In him, we hear that cry when we have seen someone who has suffered so much - it seems that they continue on only to face another tragedy. Although I do not believe God brings tragedy and evil to our world, there are times when my heart cries out "Have they not suffered enough?" "How much can they be expected to bear?" And we are told that God hears this cry, God listens to the voice of Elijah, and the child was filled with life.

Our story in Luke is incredibly similar - and the similarity is probably intentional. The way Luke tells it, from the initial meeting of both widows at the town gates to giving the son back to their mother, was probably intended to remind Jewish readers about this famous miracle of their greatest prophet.

There are many similarities, but the one great difference should draw our attention. Elijah cries out to God to bring the boy back to life. Jesus, on the other hand, says, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" And the dead man sat up and began to speak.

Elijah asks God, and God hears and raises the boy. Jesus speaks the word and life comes forth. From the very beginning of our story, there is one whose word brings life. In the very beginning, God spoke and life burst forth all over the earth. Here, this man speaks life into existence. This is no prophet; this is God in human form. This is the God who created the universe, here among the people.

And because this is God, this story takes on new meaning. It gives us insight into who God is, how God acts, and who we are called to be if we are to be like God.

Jesus and the crowd with him meet this widow leading the body of her son out of town to be buried. She traditionally would be leading the body because truly, part of her died with him. And Luke tells us that Jesus sees her, and rather than standing by while she passed, or going on about his business, Jesus has compassion on her.

This word compassion literally means 'to suffer with'. The Greek word here comes from the word for bowels, that deep place in you that feels as if it is turning over when you see the pain of another. For Greeks, the seat of emotion, of feeling was in the bowels, similar to how we now metaphorically use the heart.

This word is only used two other times by Luke. He uses it once when the Good Samaritan has compassion on the man left beaten and robbed on the side of the road. The second time is when the father sees his prodigal son returning home. These are two of the most famous passages that teach us who God is and how we are called to live.

In both of those instances, and here when Jesus sees the woman, they are overcome with feeling for the plight of the one who is suffering. And what is most important - they all do something about it. Their compassion leads them to help the one who is suffering.

Perhaps that is not surprising to us, but it actually is an incredible, amazing thing we learn about God in the flesh. In Greek culture, to be moved by another was an incredible sign of weakness, and especially humiliating for a man. Men were not to be driven by emotions. Women were weaker and controlled by feelings, but men were given a mind and through that mind they should make decisions and carry on their life. In fact, this aspect of being a man is so strong that one word that is now sometimes translated as 'homosexual' in 1 Corinthians actually means 'soft.' In other places, it is simply used to mean one who is driven by their emotions. To be driven by feelings was to be like a woman, which was a failure for a man in their culture.

And so this story about Jesus is quite incredible. Notice that unlike most miracle stories, no one comes running to Jesus begging for a miracle. The widow does not even ask. Perhaps she is too far beyond hope to even imagine what could help her at this point. This is not an instance of Jesus granting someone's request, or even giving in to someone's persistence. When Jesus sees this widow, he is overcome with compassion and he responds entirely out of deep well of feeling. Despite the fact that culture would call him weak or soft, Jesus feels compassion for her and acts out of it. And perhaps equally important, the Gospel writer, trying to convey the story of Jesus to a Greek man, finds this important enough to pass on.

Jesus wasn't driven by what culture thought a *man* should be. Jesus embodied the fullness of what a *human* was made to be because he was God incarnate. God takes on flesh and so we learn who God is and who we are called to be.

Before we pass off these ideas as mistaken parts of ancient culture that we no longer buy, I think this passage still has something to say to us. Sometimes when discussing this idea that Greek culture thought women were driven by emotions but men were driven by rational thought, we hold ourselves up and clarify that with our enlightened understanding today, we know that women are capable of rational thought just like men. That women can be as good as men, but we still hold rational thought as the higher way of conducting oneself.

But this is not what we see in Jesus, God in the flesh, How he acts towards this widow tells us something different.

Jesus has compassion on her. He feels her suffering and he chooses to use the power that he has to change it. He does not rationalize that he could not help every widow, so it is pointless to help this one. He does not question whether or not they deserve such a miracle. He does not think about all the preaching he has to do, the people who will hear his message if he hurries on wherever he is going.

He simply sees her, feels her suffering, and he does something about it.

This is a glimpse of God - who God is and how God acts in our world. And it is a powerful glimpse of God.

Throughout Scripture, we are promised that God knows our suffering and has compassion for us. God neither brings our suffering nor stands afar when we are in pain. Even while our

minds search for what might have made us deserve tragedy, God joins us in our suffering. God is there with us in our pain, and acts out of compassion.

In embodying the fullness of what humanity was made to be, Jesus shows us who we are to be. And while many of us have not experienced the power to raise the dead, we in this church have been given incredible power and privilege to help those we meet.

In my first month of ordained ministry, I remember the rector and I driving away from the hospital. It had been my first death in the parish, a woman who died far too young after a terrible battle with cancer. We were quiet much of the way, and then he started to say, "All these people driving past. You never know what they have going on. Maybe that guy's wife just left him. Maybe that person's child was just diagnosed with a terrible disease. Maybe they just lost their job. We all just drive past each other, never knowing what each other are going through."

Sometimes the suffering is harder to pinpoint; sometimes the struggles are silent. But if we are to be like Jesus, we must remember, as the Jewish philosopher Philo said 2000 years ago, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle."

How many who are suffering do we walk past each day? How do we respond when we see their suffering? Are we even aware? Do we look to truly see them? Or do we pass by, too busy to help, too afraid of what we will encounter, too worried that we will feel suffering and not be able to fix it? Or are we willing to see and be seen, to be overcome with compassion and have faith to act on it?

There will always be reasons to pass by those who are suffering, especially those among us who are most vulnerable. There will always be reasons to do so and there will be other important things to do.

But that is not what our God would do. And that is not what our God longs for us to do.

Jesus, God in the flesh, is the one who sees and stops and has compassion. Our God is with those who are suffering, and if we are to be with God here on earth, that is where we must follow. If we are to be hands and feet of Christ in this world, then we must see the suffering of those we meet and allow ourselves to be filled with the compassion of God in whom we have known the greatest compassion. And let us, like Jesus, allow that compassion to lead us to join him in the healing of our world.

I'll close with those words which I often offer at the blessing:

My friends, life is short and there is never too much time to gladden the hearts of those journey with us, so be swift to love, make haste to be kind, and the blessing of God who made us, who loves us, and who travels with us, be with you now and forever. Amen.