

**He Had Compassion – June 5, 2016**  
**Luke 7:11-17 and 1 Kings 17:8-24**  
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In both our scripture lessons this morning we heard stories about dead people being raised. The stories are strikingly similar. One speaks of the prophet Elijah doing the raising, and in the other, it's Jesus performing the deed. Both stories also include widows who held a precarious place in ancient society. Without a husband to provide for them, they relied on their sons to care for their needs. Without sons or a husband, a woman often found herself in a very dire situation - forced to live on the margins of society and having no recourse but to beg for her survival. In both stories these widows watched their only sons die before eyes. In the story from 1 Kings, the boy was just a child. In the story from Luke, the son was an adult.

Whether just a boy or already a man, a mother having to bury her son is indeed a tragedy in any time or place. Any time we hear of grieving parents having to bury their children, we are struck by the intensity of the pain. It's not the way it should be. We long for a world where children live full and happy lives.

Oftentimes we look at these stories about raising people from the dead and see only the miracle. And sometimes this leads people to believe that if they have enough faith, tragedy could be averted.

People pray and pray for the miracle, but the miracle does not come. And then invariably the question comes up, why does this happen? Why does God allow this to occur? And then the other question, why won't God heal my child? Or why didn't God stop my child from running out into the road? Or why did God allow two teenagers to fight with deadly weapons? Or why didn't God stop the child from drowning in the lake?

These are all very valid questions. And then we read stories like the ones for today. Stories of Elijah and Jesus raising sons from the dead. We see the miracle and wonder about the arbitrariness of God. Because, if you think about it, other sons also died that day, but God did not step in those situations. In the story from 1 Kings, there was great drought in the land. Many people were without food. The widow that Elijah met wasn't the only one who suffered. Others were dying of starvation. And in the town of Nain, where Jesus happened upon the funeral procession – where there not others in town who could have benefited from his healing touch? Certainly so.

But the focus of these stories is not on the miracle, per se. But more on the motivation behind these acts of mercy, these acts of compassion. In these scripture passages Elijah and

Jesus were both considered to be prophets of God. A prophet is one who spoke God's word to the people. The prophet was the voice of God, and his actions and his words came directly from God. The actions performed by the prophet were not for his own glory but to glorify God. That the people might know that God was a God of great mercy and compassion.

And so Elijah. He had come to this poor widow, who was preparing her last bit of food for her and her son, and was readying herself for death from starvation. Yet even in her destitution, she offered hospitality to Elijah, giving him a meal from all that she had left. And Elijah promised her that God would provide food for her, and the promise was true.

Yet not long after, her child became ill and died. Her grief was immeasurable. What an ironic turn of events. She had been prepared to die from starvation, yet through this prophet, God provided for her food. And then, just when things seemed to be going so well, her son was stricken with a fatal illness. Not surprisingly she turned her anger on the prophet and blamed him for this tragedy. How could you save us from starvation, yet bring this calamity upon me? Perhaps many of us here today can relate to this woman's frustration. Sometimes it seems like one bad thing follows another, driving us to our breaking point. She cried out in her fury, "How could you do this to me?"

Not only had she lost her child, but her future as a sonless widow would lead to even greater hardship for her. Elijah was stricken by her heartbreak and he had compassion for her. He felt her misery within himself, and he went to God and pleaded on her behalf. The child was raised from the dead, and Elijah gave him back to his mother. And the woman recognized him as God's prophet, as one who spoke the truth of God, through his words and his deeds.

In the story from Luke, Jesus had just left Capernaum. He had healed the servant of a Roman Centurion and had attracted quite a crowd of followers along with his disciples. He approached the gate for the town of Nain, with this great entourage, and met up with a funeral procession, also accompanied by a large crowd of people. He found out that it was a man who had died, and he was the only son of his mother, a widow.

When Jesus saw this woman, his heart broke for her. In the text it says that he had compassion for her. A more accurate translation would be something more like, seeing her was a gut-wrenching experience. He could actually feel her pain within himself. If you've ever experienced intense emotional pain or heard extremely shocking news, you know what that feels like. It hits you right in the pit of your stomach.

In that moment, Jesus knew her pain and had compassion for her. Again it was more than just a mother losing a child, it was a widow losing her only means of support. Beyond the emotional anguish she suffered, she was also put into a position of financial destitution. And as a prophet comes into the world to share the word of God with God's people, both through word and deed, Jesus decided to act. Jesus told the woman not to weep. He wasn't being callous, he was preparing her for what was to come. The time for weeping would soon be over. This is a hint at the future, when God's kingdom will find its fulfillment. In that future, there will be no more tears, no more pain. Jesus came into the world to inaugurate that kingdom.

Jesus walked up to the coffin, touched it, and told the young man to get up. Immediately the young man sat up and began to talk, and then Jesus gave him to his mother. The crowds were seized by fear. The amazement came later. I don't know about you, but I think if I had been there, I would have been pretty scared myself. It's not every day that a dead man begins to talk. Soon the people began to praise God, calling Jesus a great prophet. They didn't call him a miracle-worker, but called him a prophet – one who speaks God's word to the people. They exclaimed that God has shown favor upon his people. That's the key to the passage, not the miracle itself.

Elijah and Jesus acted out of their compassion for these widows. Yet they also acted in their roles as God's prophets, showing the world that God cares for the destitute and has mercy on those who are outcast. What does this mean for us, we who are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ, and follow in his footsteps? It means that we too are to have compassion for those who are marginalized, lost and without hope.

What is compassion? It's not pity. It's not sympathy. It's not just feeling bad for someone's plight and then moving on. Compassion does have a component of emotion to it, but it goes deeper than that. It also contains an element of action. We are so moved by whatever it is we see or experience, that we are compelled to act. Jesus felt the agony of the widow, and he understood her plight. He didn't just say, "There, there, it will be okay." No, he did what was in his power to do. He didn't have to think about it, he didn't have to form a committee to decide what to do. He simply acted. And through his actions, the crowd saw God. He didn't have to preach a sermon or hand out pamphlets or brochures that explained God's love for them. The people witnessed what he did, and in that action, they recognized God at work in the world.

In our lessons for today, what a prophet did spoke as much about God's concern for the world as what the prophet said. Well, Presbyterians have had a long history for being

concerned for social justice, and sometimes we just need to be reminded of that. It goes beyond just writing a check, though money certainly can be useful. A big part of having compassion for someone has to do with being able to empathize with that person – being able to put yourself in their shoes, being able to walk alongside and build relationships.

Think about the work that we have been doing through the feeding ministries at this church, and think about the lives that are touched. Perhaps you've brought in food to donate. Or maybe you've spent a few hours at the pantry working as a volunteer. Maybe you've picked up an order of food from the stores in town or helped tend the garden or brought in produce from your own garden. Maybe you've come to Soup's On and sat at a table with some of our guests and listened to their stories. Maybe you've worked at a Community Supper and shared an encouraging smile with the people who come through the line.

Did you ever stop to think about the individual lives that are affected by our feeding ministries? Can you picture a face in your mind? Someone who can get food and save a few extra dollars at the grocery store and use it pay a utility bill. Someone who lives on a fixed income and money gets a little tight before the next check comes in. Someone who is dealing with an illness in the family, and just needs a little help to get by. Someone who is struggling with addiction. Someone who is experiencing the trauma of broken relationships.

Most of the time we never know how our acts of compassion will affect someone's life. When we come to the aid of people in need, whatever their need might be, we are fulfilling our calling as members of the church of Jesus Christ. When we walk alongside someone in their struggle – when we show compassion to others through our acts of service – when we stand up or speak out for those who cannot – we are sharing the compassion of Christ, and in that act of caring, the work of God is being accomplished.