

February 9, 2025
Luke 7:11-17
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Earlier, I mentioned the people who watch the Super Bowl only for the commercials. I am those people. I sometimes watch it for the halftime show too, but always for the commercials. I was excited earlier this week when Anheuser-Busch released their new Super Bowl commercial early. It features a sweet little foal who is a very big helper. Anheuser Busch and the iconic Clydesdales have made some of the most memorable commercials. This one from 2014 is my favorite.

<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1ak9qf>

While this commercial has not impacted the kind of beer I prefer, it does reinforce my deep love for Labradors.

We know what advertisers are trying to do. When we watch their commercials, they want us to feel something so that we will then do something. Usually what they want us to do is buy their product. Over the years, companies like Hallmark and Folgers have been masterful at making us feel something. But honestly, Hallmark's commercials haven't convinced me to buy more greeting cards, and as wonderful as the Folgers holiday commercials are, I don't like Folgers coffee, so I don't buy it. These commercials all make me feel something, but only for a moment.

Some advertisers, though, aren't after the warm, fuzzy feelings that companies like Hallmark play on. I am thinking about organizations like the SPCA and Save the Children. You've seen these commercials. They feature cold, wet dogs in cages, all alone. Or malnourished children living in horrible conditions with flies buzzing all around. Most of us can't watch those commercials and not feel something. What is that something? It's likely pity. We feel sorry for the animals we will never see face to face. We pity the mothers on the other side of the world who are forced to watch their children suffer. Our pity does sometimes compel us to send money to these organizations. Because of course, we want to do something to help the ones who are "less fortunate than we are."

Today we will read a story in which the author tells us Jesus felt compassion for a grieving mother. This story will help us talk about the differences between pity and compassion and why this difference matters, both to us and to the people we either have compassion for or pity. This is Luke 7:11-17.

11 [Jesus] went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. 12 As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow, and with her was a large crowd from the town. 13 When the Lord saw her, he was moved with compassion for her and said to her, "Do not cry." 14 Then he came forward and touched the stand that

supported the body, and the bearers stopped. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” 15 The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 16 Fear seized all of them, and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has risen among us!” and “God has visited his people!” 17 This word about him spread throughout the whole of Judea and all the surrounding region.

By this point in Luke’s narrative, Jesus’ healing powers were well-established. He had performed exorcisms, cured diseases, healed a person with leprosy, a person who was paralyzed, and a person who was enslaved by a Roman centurion. With this story, the author took it up a notch and Jesus raised the man from death.

There is really great symbolism present here. Imagine the scene. Two processions were walking through the streets that day. The first was a symbol of death: the funeral procession with the grieving mother, the body of her son, and the crowd of mourners. The second procession consisting of Jesus, his disciples, and a large crowd, represented life. The two processions met and when they did, the text tells us that Jesus was moved with compassion for the widow. I want us to notice that when death is met with life, there is compassion.

I don’t usually dabble in Greek because I didn’t learn Greek in seminary. After learning Hebrew, I was done. But I think the Greek word in verse 13 that we translate in English as “compassion” is important.

The Greek word is “splanchnizomai” (splanhk knee zo my) and it comes from “splanchna,” (spludge na) which means “intestines.” What Jesus experienced was so strong he felt it in his gut. Jesus’ response to that mother’s suffering was not abstract or intellectual, he felt her suffering on a visceral level. This deep gut-wrenching feeling” is compassion and true compassion always leads to action. True compassion doesn’t allow us to just return to our regularly scheduled program.

There are three places in the author of Luke’s story in which the author used “splanchnizomai” (splanhk knee zo my). Our text today is the first. The second is in the Parable of the Good Samaritan to describe the feeling that moved the Samaritan to care for the man who was robbed and injured. The second is in the Parable of the Prodigal Son when the word was used to describe how the father felt about his wayward son as he ran out to welcome him home. ¹

We can certainly point to other times Jesus demonstrated compassion in the author of Luke’s narrative, even when he didn’t use “splanchnizomai” (splanhk knee zo my) to describe it. Again and again, Jesus listens to, heals, invites, and cares for the ones who are oppressed or poor and the ones everyone else just passes by. The Jesus the author wants us to know was not a man who felt pity for the people he encountered, but a man who felt compassion and understood the power of relationships.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/raising-the-widows-son/commentary-on-luke-71-17-2>, accessed 2/3/25.

Way back at the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus said he had come to bring the good news of liberation and jubilee to everyone, not just the people he grew up with and not just the people like him. He chose to enter into the suffering of all kinds of people. He did not distance himself from the pain that was all around him. He met it with compassion and connection.

Catholic priest and author Henri Nouwen describes Jesus' life as "the path of downward mobility." We live in a world where people generally choose power, wealth, and self-preservation. I wonder if our desire to preserve ourselves contributes to our tendency to distance ourselves from the suffering of others. Pity is easier than compassion. We can feel sorry for someone and walk away pretty easily. Jesus, on the other hand, chose pain, authentic relationships, and the common good, which ultimately cost him his life.

Jesus' "path of downward mobility" is not the same as helping "those less fortunate than we are." We want to be able to call our volunteering and our check-writing or online giving acts of compassion and maybe they are. For sure these are good things, otherwise, I wouldn't stand up here and ask you to give your money to the church every week and encourage you to be involved in our shared ministry. Serving our neighbors is good. Helping people is good and a lot of the time helping requires money.

Yale Divinity School professor Dr. Michal Beth Dinkler wrote a commentary on this text in which she says, "...when we are able to maintain our distance or stay in a place 'above' those we serve, such acts become easily acts of pity, rather than compassion." She continues, "This is the problem with serving "those less fortunate": we are somehow 'more' and they are somehow 'less.' We still have the power."² "We are somehow more and they are somehow less." Honestly, this look at the differences between pity and compassion has messed me up this week. So much of the helping of people Rev. Hubbard and I do every week is done with money, with the money we all contribute to the church. And it is good stuff. Gas for people to get to doctor appointments in Tulsa. Shoes for a mom's new job. Registration for a child's extracurricular activity. A car part so that the family car will provide transportation in a town with no public transportation. We help people all the time. And it matters.

But I think there is a growing edge for us in all of this. Paraphrasing theologian, author, and civil rights activist Rev. Howard Thurman, pity ruins everything it touches.³ Relationships built on one person's pity for another are never equal. One person is always more or over, and the other person is always less or beneath. The nature of compassion is that there is no distance. It doesn't allow us to breeze on by the feelings, like a Hallmark commercial or even an SPCA one. It forces us to feel them

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/raising-the-widows-son/commentary-on-luke-71-17-2>, accessed 2/3/25.

³ Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1953, 1981), 49.

and act on them. And that makes us uncomfortable. There is a little part of us that wants to be different from the ones who are suffering because then we can be assured that their suffering won't be ours.

But it is ours. The suffering of our neighbors is ours.

In a blog post last March, minister and author Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber shared a little about the time she has spent with people who are incarcerated. She wrote, "In my mind, pity isn't even analogous to compassion. Pity is just the paternalistic cousin of contempt. It allows us to see others as "those less fortunate than ourselves" (a term I loathe). Pity keeps the other person at a distance and me in a rarified state of satisfaction.... Compassion, on the other hand, draws us close..."

She continues, "I've yet to find healing in: self-pity, isolation, pretending I am not hurting, comparison, hardening myself, standing in judgment (although it sure feels good). But I have found it in:

Eye contact with another person who is in a tender place, the rare moments I stop filling in the blank about another person, compassion toward myself and others, [and] remaining open-hearted in moments I want to shut down..."⁴

I tried out about 5 endings for this sermon. In seminary, we are taught that we are supposed to tell people what we want them to do in response to the text. Honestly, I don't know what we are supposed to do with any of this. It feels like there is so much suffering all around us. It feels like there is so much suffering in this room. Asking you to feel more suffering seems unreasonable and unhelpful. Jesus must have felt the same way, right? He must have felt like suffering was all around him. He must have wished that the pain in his gut would stop. Maybe it was that pain that compelled him to risk everything and start his public ministry in the first place.

I am not sure what to do. But it seems to me that if we are going to follow the ways of Jesus, we have to be willing to have a stomachache sometimes. We have to meet death and despair with life and hope, even when it hurts, even when we would rather look away, even when we would rather distance ourselves. When all we want to do is protect ourselves, we have to risk relationships with all kinds of people because suffering isn't picky, so compassion can't be either.

This may not seem like a joyful end to a sermon. But it is. The joy is in the journey we are on together. The joy is that when life hurts too much for one of us, the rest of us can take over. The joy is knowing that there is life beyond what we see presently. And we can have a hand in creating it.

It may make us cry sometimes, but I bet there will be laughter through those tears sometimes too. Like Truvy in *Steel Magnolias* said, "Laughter through tears is my favorite emotion." Amen.

⁴ Nadia Bolz-Weber, "Humans Are Inconveniently Complex," *The Corners* (blog), March 11, 2024, accessed, 2/7/25.