

Luke 7:1-17

February 7, 2021

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A few years ago, Pixar released a movie called *Inside Out*. I think I've mentioned it before in a sermon. The animated feature toggles between what was happening outwardly in the life of Riley, a young girl, and what was happening inside her brain, specifically, how her emotions affected her actions. Throughout the movie, Riley experienced a range of emotions and movie-goers were introduced to those emotions in the form of five characters in the control center of her brain: Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger and Disgust.

These characters caused Riley to react to outside stimulus based on what she was feeling. For example, Disgust caused quite a reaction when her dad fed her broccoli for the first time, but Joy rushed in as her spoon turned into an airplane, depositing the broccoli in her mouth.

The film is a great jumping off point for talking to young people about their emotions and how expressing them is part of what makes us human. I think it's important for all of us to recognize that no emotion is bad, but there are ways to express them that are healthier than others.

Human emotions are universal, but how humans deal with them is not. There are huge cultural differences in how people express emotions and individual differences too. Some of us respond to sadness by crying, others respond by changing the subject or by retreating to our own safe place. And some of us experience not only our own emotions, but the emotions of other people as well. Those people are called empaths.

I consider myself an expert on empaths because I am one. And this part of me is baffling to my husband who is not an empath. When I encounter someone, who is sad or angry or frustrated, I feel those feelings with them. Most of the time, I appreciate that about myself. Even if I have never experienced what the other person is experiencing, I have felt the way they feel and there is a connection. There are times, though, that being an empath is gut-wrenching and exhausting, like amid the deep suffering of a global pandemic.

Included in today's text, are two miracle stories. Both stories tell of Jesus' encounter with people who were experiencing deep suffering. This is Luke 7:1-17:

7 After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ² A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. ³ When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. ⁴ When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, ⁵ for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." ⁶ And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; ⁷ therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸ For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." ⁹ When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." ¹⁰ When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

¹¹ Soon afterwards he 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 had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." ¹⁴ Then he came forward and touched the frame where the body rested, and the bearers stood still. 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 looked favorably on his people!" ¹⁷ This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

These are not the first miracles recorded by the author of the Gospel of Luke. In the Lukan narrative up to this point, Jesus had already performed exorcisms, cursed diseases, cleansed a leper, and healed a paralytic.

Now, here we are with two healing stories side by side, one in Capernaum and the other in Nain. You may remember a couple weeks ago, when I preached on the miraculous catch of fish as Jesus called his first disciples, I said they the gospel

authors use miracles to teach us something about God and something about Jesus' mission.

That is true of these miracle stories and that Luke put these stories side-by-side in his narrative gives us a clue that each story helps us interpret the other, so let's compare them.

The first story introduces us to a Roman centurion. He was a man with significant wealth, power, and privilege, which seems to have included owning slaves. And because a slave is part of this story, I have to say this: Slavery was part of the first century Roman Empire, just as it has been part of many cultures, in many places and times, the United States. All of us, but especially our Black siblings, continue to be affected by the sin of slavery. Never, in the history of history has God ever condoned slavery. It has never been okay to enslave another human. The fact that today's story has Jesus healing a slave and restoring him to slavery is problematic. Why didn't Jesus liberate him too? When I brought this up in a clergy group this week, there was wide disagreement. Mostly, people didn't want to question Jesus' actions. Well, Jesus doesn't get a free pass from me. I think we can't gloss over the fact that slavery has always been wrong and I don't think there is anything wrong with thinking about the fact that the slave in this story needed healing and liberation. And he didn't get them both. But he did receive healing.

So...the first story introduced us to a Roman centurion. He was a man with significant wealth, power, privilege. In the second story, there was a widow. Widows are women, usually with no wealth, no power, and no privilege. The centurion sent Jewish elders to advocate on his behalf, to ask Jesus to heal the slave. The widow was accompanied by a large crowd of people, but Jesus initiated the healing on his own. The centurion spoke and people did what he said...the Jewish elders and then his friends were both dispatched to Jesus. The widow never said a word. The slave was very sick and was healed from a distance. The widow's son was dead and was healed through Jesus touch of the frame carrying the body. Jesus was amazed at the centurion's faith saying, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." No mention is made of the widow's faith at all.

Looking at these stories together tells us something about Jesus' mission; the kingdom of God is for all kinds of people. It is not confined by gender, culture, wealth, power, privilege, or even by faith. Sometimes we get the idea that healing is dependent on a person's faith or the faith of the ones praying or advocating on

their behalf. Even later on in Luke, Jesus heals ten lepers and says to them, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” The problem with that is: that’s not how it works in real life. Faithful people sometimes die way too soon. People we love sometimes die, even after we have prayed for them, especially right now in a world where COVID-19 has caused more than 2.2 million deaths.

In our world, systemic injustice, poverty, underlying health conditions and age have a lot to do with who heals from COVID-19 and who does not. Death is mysterious. Who lives and who dies is not a certainty and cannot be predicted by the depth of someone’s faith or lack of faith in any god. These stories from Luke highlight that for us because you better believe there were other widows burying their sons in Galilee in Jesus’ day. They just didn’t get lucky enough to run into Jesus on the street in the middle of the funeral procession. There were other sick people in Capernaum, probably other sick slaves, yet the centurion’s slave was healed. And more than 2000 years later, in a world where medical advances are incredible, not everyone recovers: illness and healing and death still hold deep mystery. People die. We all die. So, while we are here, we are called to live, and to try to reflect who God is and what the kin-dom of God is like through our lives.

And this brings me to what these two stories set side-by-side teach us about God. Jesus’ response to the deep suffering in both stories reflects God’s deep, unwavering, compassion. The word compassion literally means, “suffering with.” I talked earlier about empathy. Compassion is related to empathy in that empathy is our attempt to feel how others feel. Compassion goes one step farther. Compassion enters into the suffering of another person and creates the desire within us to help ease that suffering.

Catholic priest and theologian Henri Nouwen said it well when he wrote, “Compassion means going directly to those people and places where suffering is most acute and building a home there. God’s compassion is total, absolute, unconditional, without reservation.”

(Henri Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*, Doubleday, 1982, 27.)

If we want to reflect God into this world, we have to be compassionate. But you and I both know, compassion is hard. For me, it’s not hard to enter into another person’s suffering. That comes pretty easily, almost automatically for me.

Compassion is hard because so often we reach a dead end when it comes to easing someone's suffering, but compassion doesn't stop at a dead end. And that is why compassion is hard, it's hard on our hearts.

Thursday afternoon I was gathering my things to leave the church for the day. I went to the kitchen to wash a few dishes and I heard the church phone ring, but by the time I got to the office, it had stopped. I went back to the kitchen, finished up and went into my office to put my coat on. As I was picking up my briefcase and phone, I realized I had missed a phone call. I listened to the voicemail. It was someone I didn't know. She was crying and asked me to call her back. I called her back right away and reached her, still crying. She told me her name and said she and her husband were staying at a motel in Bartlesville. They had a house fire, her husband was out of work, and she had just been tested for COVID because she has symptoms. It was about 4:45pm. She told me if she didn't find the money to pay for the motel, they had to leave at 5:00pm and they had nowhere to go.

I asked her if she had tried all the usual organizations I try to connect people to and she said she had. And I know from past experience, 4:45 pm is not a good time to get a hold of anyone anywhere. I asked her if I could make a couple of phone calls and call her back. So, I called a friend who is a social worker and I called the front desk of the motel. All I learned was that I was right, there was no place else to call for help and the woman was right, the motel was planning to have them leave in a few minutes.

I had two choices, I could pay for the room or I could tell her there was nothing I could do to help. It was a familiar place to be. I've been there before. It makes me physically sick. I couldn't even suggest a shelter in Tulsa because there was the potential that she was COVID positive. And no matter what I did for that one night, tomorrow was coming and she would be right back in the same place.

I paid for two nights in the motel, Thursday and Friday. And Friday I connected with Rev. Ray Hickman at Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church and our two churches split the cost of the motel for the next week. I took the couple groceries on Saturday when I went to pay for the room. The woman told me she had called dozens of churches on Thursday and I was the only minister who called her back. On some level, I get it. It would be much easier to delete the voicemail or decide to return the call later. Compassion is hard. It's hard because you can't turn it off.

Once you feel it, you want to ease the other person's suffering. And sometimes, there ends up being nothing to do. And then you will cry yourself to sleep or lay awake thinking about them. But, as hard as it is, it is what we are called to. I return every call for help I receive, not because I can always fix it. I return the calls because the very least I can do is bear witness to the other person's suffering. They deserve to be heard and to be told they are loved. Often, for the people I talk to, the fact that someone shows compassion for them is the miracle. I don't know if Jesus really healed the slave or brought the son back to life, but I do believe he would have wanted to. And these stories seem to tell us that Jesus' compassion did not have to be earned...his compassion was for all who suffered.

I will end with this from civil rights activist, author, and theologian Howard Thurman. Thurman is one of my favorite theologians and is an example of Black Excellence. This is the second half of his meditation called "Not Pity, but Compassion," recorded in the book, *Meditations of the Heart*. I have retained Thurman's original language at the request of the Estate of Howard Thurman.

***SLIDE**

God is making room in my heart for compassion: the awareness that where my life begins is where your life begins; the awareness that the sensitiveness to your needs cannot be separated from the sensitiveness to my needs; the awareness that the joys of my heart are never mine alone--nor are my sorrows. I struggle against the work of God in my heart; I want to be let alone. I want my boundaries to remain fixed, that I may be at rest. But even now, as I turn to Him in the quietness, His work in me is ever the same.

God is at work enlarging the boundaries of my heart.

I pray that God will continue to enlarge the boundaries of our hearts. Amen.