

Compassion

Pentecost II – Year C – June 6, 2010

1 Kings 17:8-16 – Psalm 146 – Galatians 1:11-24 – Luke 7:11-17

When we experience compassion for other people, we will likely spend many of our days with a broken heart.

But that is exactly when we are the most whole; that is exactly when we are the most complete; that is exactly when we are most fully made in the image of God.

This story is set in the Gospel at a very early stage in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus, his disciples, and a large crowd are on the road in near the Lake of Galilee. They have just Capernaum, the small village on the shore of the large lake. It was on those shores that Jesus called his first followers. So far in the Jesus story, as the gospel write Luke tells the tale, Jesus has been baptized, tempted by the devil, delivered his first sermon in Nazareth, called his 12

disciples, healed people from demon-possession and leprosy. And most recently, the slave of a Roman soldier has been healed. It's no wonder that a large crowd has begun to follow Jesus. Who knew what might happen next?

So this gospel story begins with a parade. A parade that has left Capernaum and headed south, down the Jezereel Valley. And along the way they encounter an all together different kind of parade. Luke tells us that as they arrive at the city gates of Nain they meet a funeral cortège. A widow and her friends are taking the body of her only son to his grave.

The contrast between these two groups could not be greater. One group following a young rabbi who was beginning to make quite a name for himself. This crowd was ready to hear the next parable, the next sermon, to witness another healing. They were eager and full of anticipation.

The other group is following a woman who had lost first her husband and then her son. This family name has effectively expired. With no male heir and no man in the household, the widow's future is not very bright. There is nothing very eager about this crowd. There isn't much to anticipate for the woman, except a house that is even more quiet and empty than before. It doesn't seem like the two parades that meet in the middle of the road have very much in common.

You can bet that the crowd that was following Jesus was ready to do the polite, but safe thing, of moving off to the side of the road and letting the funeral parade pass on by. Very much like we do today, when we're driving down the road and see a line of cars with their lights on, led by a hearse. Our societal norms and culture calls for us to stop our cars and wait for the procession to go by.

The rules of polite and expected behavior were even more pronounced in the days of Jesus. Touching the dead made you unclean. The crowd following Jesus would have been very, very careful to step off to the side of the road and let this particular parade continue on its way.

But instead, that's where the two parades meet. It's where the two parades discover that they do have one thing in common. The most important thing. When these two groups meet they have the person of Jesus, in common.

It is in this story that we encounter an aspect of the life and character of Jesus that gives us a glimpse into the divine life of God. It's summed up in the simple word – compassion.

Our English word compassion is really inadequate to describe the reaction and response of Jesus. The original Greek word is so deep and urgent in its meaning, that compassion almost comes across as a little wimpy.

Jesus doesn't have a twinge of mercy, or a passing moment of concern. When Jesus sees the widow in her grief, he's shaken up, his soul is moved. He empathizes with the grieving widow and mother deep, deep in his gut. The gospel writers reserve this word that we translate as compassion for very, very special occasions. The Good Samaritan is moved with compassion when he sees the man on the side of the road. The father who had two sons is moved with compassion when he sees

his prodigal son return home. And Jesus is moved with compassion.

That's what this story is designed to tell us. The response of God is compassion. Soul shaking, deep in the gut, compassion.

When the children of God are left in the ditch on the side of the road, God responds with compassion.

When the children of God wander far from home and finally come to their senses and return home, God responds with compassion.

When the children of God are in grief or trouble, God responds with compassion.

When Jesus meets the widow in the middle of the road, he does not step aside – afraid to encounter death, content to and let her pass on by, lost in her grief and loneliness. Instead, Jesus is moved with compassion.

Our lesson from this story *is not* that we should expect Jesus to interrupt our next funeral and bring our dead back to life. If that had been the point of the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus – he would have spent his entire life going to funerals. He didn't do that.

If I can dare say it – at least one of 'the points' of the life and ministry of Jesus was to give us this model of compassion. Deep – deep in the gut – compassion.

It is an amazing turn of the spirit, that on this day, with a gospel lesson about Jesus showing up at a funeral and being filled with compassion, that we also come to bury Kathryn Moran.

Compassion is a virtue that comes easily to mind when I reflect upon Kathryn's life, the things she was passionate about, the various ministries in which she was engaged. It's impossible for me to think about Kathryn and not bear in mind her love for God's creation – especially that most mysterious of all of God's creation – the cat. And most especially – any cat that was abandoned or in need of special care and attention and love.

Perhaps less visible on a day-to-day basis to many, was the deep-in-the-gut compassion that Kathryn knew and felt and lived and breathed for the immigrant farm worker community. This isn't the time for Kathryn's eulogy – we'll come back together in July to celebrate and remember her life.

However – it is a remarkable gift of the Holy Spirit – brought to us by those good folk who put together the lectionary calendar of readings – that on this morning, we can reflect upon compassion as taught to us by Jesus of Nazareth, and also remember the life of Kathryn, one of the saints.

Compassion - that soul shaking, deep-in-the-gut compassion that Jesus taught us about – is not easy, and it's not cheap.

When we practice, as best we can, that kind of compassion, we will often end up with a broken heart. That's one of the many paradoxes of our life with God. When we experience compassion for other people, we will likely spend many of our days with a broken heart.

But that is exactly when we are the most whole; that is exactly when we are the most complete; that is exactly when we are most fully made in the image of God.