

Raising Life  
A Sermon Preached at Larchmont Avenue Church  
by Rev. Julie Emery  
June 27, 2010

*Luke 7:11-17*

*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 bier, 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.*

There is a gut-wrenching moment that changes you. There is a moment when distant caring becomes a tangible, visceral, bodily response. For some it comes when experience unites your heart with another's. For some it comes when feeling overflows into the body so that inaction is no longer an option.

If you talk with any activist you will hear the story of that gut-driven moment, and how it suddenly all changed. I myself have little moments - moments when the issue of violence against women became very real and terribly essential. The moment when the beauty of my surroundings made me reconsider my laziness towards recycling, the moment when I sat at the bedside of a dying man and understood what it might be to die with dignity and the expansive depth of grief. We have all felt them - those gut impulses of compassion for another, the desire to help, the desire to change something for the better, the desire to reach out beyond ourselves.

The word is pronounced “splaḡch – niz- omai” and it means literally “to be moved in the inward parts.” Rev. Crawford mentioned it last week when he named the word used to describe God’s fatherly compassion for the prodigal son returned home, the same word used to describe God’s love for those God knit together in our mother’s womb. Luke uses this word in only three places in his gospel: the story we heard last week of the prodigal son welcomed home by his ever-loving father, and the story of the good Samaritan, when the Samaritan is moved with compassion for the man left beaten on the side of the road. And then again in our story for today, when Jesus is so moved by the weeping of a mother at her son’s funeral that he breaks all boundaries to help her.

To be moved on the inside. To be moved in your guts.

In our story for this morning, Jesus is walking with a large crowd of followers and approaches the gate of a town in Galilee called Nain when he comes upon a funeral procession. The funeral is for a grown man, and we are told he is his mother’s only son, and she was a widow.

What seem to be small details are big ones for the widow. As I may have mentioned before a woman’s status and stability in the ancient world was tied to the men in her life. She belonged to her husband and then to her sons. Not only that, if a woman was left without both of these – she was in dire circumstances. This woman, upon the death of her son, likely would have all of her belongings returned to her deceased husband’s family, and she would be left with nothing. If the grief that one feels at the death of a child were not enough to collapse the walls around her, certainly the loss of all property and community would be her total demise.

Jesus sees her weeping. She says nothing. He sees her weeping and is moved in his guts with compassion for her. His words seem at first cold and hurtful, “Do not weep,” he says, as if that were even possible at the grief of the death of a son. But when he crosses over

to her and puts his hand on the funeral bier; his gut feeling becomes bodily action.

I'm not sure there is much that can compare in our culture to the taboos that Jesus broke by touching the bier. The Jewish rules about cleanliness had strict guidelines about touching the dead, and this action of Jesus makes clearly violates those rules. Not only that but the mere fact that Jesus is moved by the plight of someone who is small and unimportant is problematic for the culture he lives in. By allowing himself to be moved with feeling for a powerless woman makes him seem weak and unbecoming.

The widow is cast aside by her culture, now with no man to claim and provide for her. Jesus sees the unsightly, he notices the undervalued, he sees and he responds with action.

Today it is hard to imagine that by crossing cultural boundaries or physical boundaries we might truly jeopardize our own place in society or our own personal wellbeing. Maybe it is as simple as hugging a stranger at the passing of the peace without that squirt of sanitizer. Maybe we still know how eating with the wrong kind of kid at lunch makes us a pariah by association. Maybe we've experienced that inviting a certain person to the tennis club for dinner or reaching out to that immigrant on the street corner might put us in an awkward position with our friends.

But none of that really compares to the move that Jesus makes in our story today. It's more like - kissing a dirty homeless man on the mouth in front of all of our friends, or treating an AIDS victim without gloves. Perhaps it's more like giving so much of our own money away that it jeopardizes our own family's security, or taking an addict into our home till they get back onto their feet. The act of Jesus toward the widow is reckless - without care for consequences. Can you imagine?

It isn't simply that Jesus notices the woman, isn't only that he welcomes her, feels for her, cares for her. It's also that he takes

tangible action to change her situation. It's not just that he weeps with her, but he crosses the prescribed boundaries to act on that feeling-in-the-gut compassion. "Jesus doesn't just take the widow's needs seriously, he takes them into the core of his being and makes her pain his own."<sup>i</sup> And when her pain becomes his, it is impossible not to act.

I've recently started reading a wonderful little memoir called "Take this Bread," by Sara Miles.<sup>ii</sup> She was raised an atheist, assured over and over again that anyone who would believe such silliness is deluded at best. And so she begins her book with her experience, raised as a liberal, and then giving over her early adult life to reporting on various communist revolutions in Central America and throughout the world. You know from the beginning of her story that she eventually finds a home in the church, but her writing is compelling enough to keep drawing you in, wondering what is the next step on her road to Damascus.

She writes a lot about food - and how throughout her travels and experiences in countries in the midst of civil and bloody wars she seemed to again and again be fed by people hungrier and poorer than she was. She understood even before she came to faith, that what we have in common with each other is our bodies, which means that we all have common needs. She understood, then, finally, when she accidentally received her first communion, that being moved in her inward parts was fundamentally about both feeling faith and doing faith.

After Sara Miles's conversion she starts a food pantry in her church, which springs into dozens throughout the poorest parts of her city. For Miles, compassion is naturally linked to action, and so she lives out the gut-driven-faith she adopts. She is particularly drawn to the act of sharing communion, but I think she might also experience the act of baptism with that same deep movement. The waters that clean dirty, tired feet, the waters that refresh after hours of work in the hot sun; the same waters that cover a child's head and claim her as God's very own. Tangible, bodily, physical.

Professor Rolf Jacobson talks about how when we are baptized as Christians our relationship to the world changes. We still feel pain, we still make mistakes, but there is a new relationship formed with the world. One that means our solidarity with the rest of humanity matters; how we live in this world matters: what we buy, what we eat, what we give away, what we say... it all matters.

The way that Jesus marks change for the widow at Nain is more miraculous than we can fathom. Jesus says to a dead son, "I say to you, rise!" The text says that Jesus "gave him to his mother," and in doing so he not only reunited and reconciled them but also saved her from the pit of despair and destitution. The act is one of those moments of the gospels meant to show us the power of Jesus as beyond even the most powerful prophets of Israel, meant to show us the divinity of this one called "Lord." And in this way, the action of Jesus is beyond us too. Because that kind of raising of life is still beyond our power.

But for us, raising life may instead be about the act of crossing boundaries and changing the way things are seen. In seeing the unseen and acting in ways that bring about new life here and now. It may be an act of going just a little bit further: of letting the pictures of oil covered birds in the gulf move you to actually doing something about your own dependence on oil and dirty energy. Of letting the knowledge that you have a job when so many others don't move you toward offering your resume skills to the jobless or finance expertise to the single mom looking for help with her budget.

Raising life may be letting the pile of food on your plate every night move you to pile food on someone else's plate once a week at HOPE, or letting those bags of groceries you lug toward your house weekly move you to fill a few bags at the Hunger Task Force. Perhaps for us here and now Raising Life is not about raising one but about raising everyone's life a little higher.

Perhaps raising life is about letting yourself be moved, in the gut, into action that Raises Life and Love for all. Amen.

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- <sup>i</sup> Blue, Debbie writing on a blog for the Christian Century called Theolog 6/4/2007
- <sup>ii</sup> Miles, Sara Take This Bread, Random House, Inc New York 2008