

“The Root of Compassion”

Luke 7:11-17

Third Sunday after Pentecost

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Christ the King Lutheran Church

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Mother, and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

This summer we are making our way through the very middle of Luke's gospel, telling week-by-week the story of Jesus' earthly ministry. In this season after Pentecost, these stories give us, the church, a vision of the kingdom of God. They call us to engage with our neighbors as Jesus did; they call us to follow Christ into all of the messy and painful parts of life, and to proclaim God's presence there.

Last week, we heard the story of Jesus healing the slave of a centurion. Without even entering the centurion's home, Jesus cured the disease of a slave with absolutely no social power *and* he praised the faith of a centurion, a person that Jesus' own people would have considered an enemy.

And then, the very next day, Jesus and his merry band come across a sad sight in the town of Nain. This is the story we heard today. It is a funeral procession, led by a widow whose son has died too young and too soon. And we might imagine Jesus striding confidently onto the scene, in full control of what he is about to do.

After all, Jesus's identity as teacher and prophet is already well established, and he is gaining in popularity and prominence across the land. With great bravado, he has confidently taught lessons and stirred controversies. Until Nain, all of his healings have served a grand purpose, each one helping him to teach a lesson to the outsiders who question his authority.

But here, in Nain, at the sight of this widow...I think something changes for Jesus. This one feels different somehow. And we, the church, would be wise to pay attention to what Jesus encounters in Nain.

You see, here in Nain, Jesus for the first time performs a miracle for no other reason than the simple fact of *compassion*. This funeral procession of mourners causes Jesus to stop dead in his tracks. His confident prophet-teacher stride is broken, and he is motivated to heal by something deep in his gut.

In Nain, Jesus is not teaching. He is not trying to prove a point. He is not trying to call someone out. He is simply responding to the cries of one who is grieving.

Now something you may come to learn about me is that, when studying scripture, I often like to break my study all the way down to looking at individual words. Words, I think, contain power and truth within them, so looking closely at any word can occasionally reveal additional layers of meaning and truth within story.

So...if this is not your thing, forgive me. And just bear with me for the next couple of minutes. Because I want to talk to you about the Greek word that we find here in Luke's gospel for *compassion*.

Here's how it looks → **splagcni÷zomai**

It's a tangled, confusing-looking word isn't it? And it's exactly as difficult to speak out loud as it looks! Reading it in Greek is hard enough...so here it spelled out in our English alphabet → **splangchnizomai**

SPLANG-NITZ-O-MAI. Go ahead and just let that roll off your tongue. (x2)

The root of this crazy word for compassion is actually the Greek word "splagchnon," which means "bowels" or "gut." So Splang-nitz-o-mai, then, means "to be moved as from one's bowels." It's a gut punch feeling. It stops you right where you are so you can catch your breath.

This is what Jesus feels as he enters Nain. A gut punch. Compassion is a feeling that comes from a place deep within, from the viscera, from the deepest parts of the human body. According to this word, *splangchnizomai*, compassion does not leave us feeling warm and fuzzy, but knocked out, on our knees, catching our breath.

I remember the first time the actual breath was knocked out of my small body. I was sledding one winter with my dad and my sister – a perfect, beautiful, icy winter day. Over and over again we flew down the slick hill on our sleds. Until one of our rides... when we launched squarely over a snow ramp that had been built right at the fastest part of the hill.

When we landed with an ungraceful thud, I could feel all of the breath leave me, and I thought I was going to die. Never before had I felt such a thing! My stomach hurt, I couldn't breathe, and I had no idea what was happening to me.

This experience, or something like it, is also the experience of compassion in the Bible. Actually, because we are trying out this brief think-pair-share exercise this summer, why don't you turn to a neighbor quickly and recall a story about a time you had the wind knocked out of you, or were punched in the gut, or were left breathless. What did that feel like?...

That feeling that you just relived...does it feel anything like a time when you experienced the death of someone you love? Or a time when you were overwhelmed by a series of events beyond your control. There's that feeling again. Deep in the gut. *Splangchnizomai*.

It's how that widow was feeling as she walked alongside the body of her only child. The future that she imagined with him was over. And then Jesus responds in this story not to her faith, or to her heroics, or to her example, as he does in other

stories. "The Lord saw her," is all Luke has to say. Unlike the prophet Elijah, who heals a widow's son that he had been living with for years, Jesus' compassion comes in an instant.

You see the compassion that comes to us in faith does not rely upon outcome or profit or even upon a prior relationship. Compassion is when we feel the gut-pangs of one who is suffering deep within our own guts. In Nain, Jesus responds out of his compassion, out of his bowels. The widow's deep body wails find a response and a home in the body of her Savior, Jesus.

Splangchnizomai is used in Luke's gospel only two other times, and it shows up in two stories that Jesus himself tells after his experience in Nain. Here in Nain, Jesus experiences *splangchnizomai* compassion. And soon he will tell of a Samaritan who sees a man, beaten and left for dead on the side of the road and has compassion for him.

And later still Jesus will tell the story of a father who sees his long-lost son in the distance, walking back home in disgrace. This father feels the joy of his son's return in his bowels and so runs to this son while he was still far off, taking him into his arms. *Splangchnizomai*.

My friends, in our grief, in our shame, in our sorrow, we have a savior who feels within himself the pain we feel in our bodies. And by his presence with us, there, he is able to fashion for us a loving response; he calls us into a new way of living in the world; he gives our pain a new story, new life, new breath.

Immediately after he feels this compassion, Jesus raises this widow's son. It's not even clear from the story that she even sees Jesus approaching. Before anyone knows it, he is there. And may it be so for us. When the world confronts us in such a way as to knock us in the gut, to steal our breath away, Jesus' hand is there to put air into our lungs again. In Christ, God promises us a future filled with new life, and hope.

My friends in Christ, this is the good news for each of us. That Christ, in his compassion, hears our cries and promises us new life. The faith we walk by gives us the power to trust in this presence, to believe in it, even when we've been knocked to our knees.

And then, as a church, we are called to have this same compassion for all. To hear the cries of all of God's people. What motivated Jesus' acts of healing, what motivated Jesus' sense of justice, was a vision of a world made whole. He announced the kingdom of God wherever he went, and its presence among and within us. By the power of the Spirit, this vision of God's kingdom is ours to announce, too.

Wherever there is injustice or pain or discord, this too we feel in our bowels. *Splangchnizomai*. This faith, given to us by God, fills every cell and pore and breath, and compassion compels us to meet suffering wherever we see it.

Once he is raised, the widow's son immediately begins to speak, we are told. I wonder what he said. Perhaps it sounded something like the singing we do together at Christ the King as we sing of the good things that God has done for us. Perhaps he asked for forgiveness. Perhaps he told his mom how much he loved her. Whatever he said, I am sure the name of God was on his lips, that his praise came from the gut, and that his life would never be the same again. This is our life of faith, too. Let's feel our way through it together.

Amen