

4th Sunday of Pentecost

Sermon 6.5.16

Scripture: 1 Kings 7:8-16

Luke 7:11-17

I'm wondering what Jesus saw when he saw the widow in Nain and had compassion for her. I'm wondering what he *saw* when he saw her.

As it happens, Jesus fell under some criticism last week in mainline churches around the country—or at least he did in a lot of commentary I read in preparation for preaching. A lot of people whose writing was in anticipation of preaching had some critical words for Jesus at work. I didn't here, in part because I didn't preach on the gospel passage last week; instead I focused on the story of Joseph and there's only so much you can take on, on any given day.

The issue lots of people had regarding last week's passage is that a centurion had some Jews approach Jesus to ask that Jesus heal this centurion's beloved slave. The centurion, which is to say the Roman soldier who was in charge of one hundred under-soldiers, asked some Jews to do this because he assumed Jesus, as a Jew, would be more likely to help out a centurion if it was clear that this centurion was looked upon favorably by Jews, that he'd done right by those who lived under the order, and the threat, of the occupying force.

...which all seems well enough. But, as to what about this slave made him so beloved, what service this slave performed that made the possible loss of him distressing: we don't know. Why this centurion was so attached to this slave as to seek out his miraculous healing and restoration: we can't say. Roman slaves might be as well treated as an essential employee is to a well-running business, or might as badly treated as we can imagine (or worse than we can imagine, if we've trained our imaginations just not to go there). What sort of labor this slave was beloved for having done: we have no idea.

And Jesus didn't ask. He merely performed the requested task. He simply, and unquestioningly, healed (and from afar!) the slave and thus restored him to his previous servitude, however humane or inhumane this servitude might have been.

Jesus didn't ask.

From that miraculous healing in Capernaum (for which he has received some recent criticism) he moved on to a town called Nain, where he came upon a funeral procession. A man had died, was laid out on a bier and was being carried likely to his grave, while his mother walked along, a widow who had now lost her only son.

A childless widow now: to be in this state was to be all but dead yourself. No livelihood, no protectorate, the childless widow was to be as the living dead. No wonder in some cultures such a widow would throw herself on the funeral pyre of her husband or last remaining son.

Not having that as an option, though, this widow's grief was yet, I imagine, tinged with dread. What would become of her? Would she starve? Would she have to beg? Would she resort to prostituting herself, or would she be raped and tossed aside?

Or perhaps she might find a community of widows to join, the sort of which Lydia is remembered to have served among—Lydia as told of in the Book of Acts.

Perhaps.

When Jesus came upon her and that funeral procession, it all might have called to his mind the centuries-earlier encounter between Elijah and the widow of Zarepheth—and surely, it's to call that story to *our* minds. I imagine Luke, in his composing this story as he did, reliant on many of the same phrases that we see in the story as appears in First Kings, meant for it to echo that ancient encounter. I'm certain those who set the lectionary, and who then set this Old Testament passage to pair up with today's gospel passage, meant for these echoes to resound.

And so it does. So it will. But let's take, for a moment, the widow of Zarapheth on her own terms.

Living as she was in a gentile city, we can assume she was herself a gentile. This means she didn't enjoy the provisions Jewish culture and law made for women in her situation—because, really, hard and heartbreaking as widowhood was, it was at least a special class in the Jewish self-identity. As a nation, Israel understood itself to have a special mission as regards orphans and widows. Yes, other nations and cultures might also have taken these especially vulnerable groups into account. But they might not have—which is to say that the widow of Zarapheth might have had it a little easier had she been a Jew. But she wasn't.

What's more, the god of her people, Ba'al, was in a power-struggle with the god of Israel, YHWH. This is because King Ahab of Israel had married Jezebel and made her queen—Jezebel who came from this same region where the widow of Zarepheth lived and was now suffering drought and famine; Jezebel who, as a gentile lording over Jews, made Jewish practice illegal and established under the threat of punishment the worship of Ba'al.

This, of course, was deeply offensive to the people Israel. That they needed to worship some god other than their god, that they needed to practice rites and rituals other than their rites and rituals: this was deeply disturbing to the people Israel. This was perhaps even cause for active resistance, which courted outbreaks of violence on all sides.

And before you roll your eyes at such small-minded interreligious quarreling, before you shake your head at how primitive people can be, before we all congratulate ourselves for operating on a higher plane of interreligious peaceful coexistence and cultural relativism, consider that one of the practices of the worship of Ba'al was ritual child sacrifice.

The Israelites simply would not do that. They used to it—probably. Like all peoples, they'd once done that. But they hadn't done it for a long time, generations, centuries; and they weren't going to go back to that now.

In short, this was a battle between gods yet with real human stakes.

So, YHWH sent the prophet Elijah to set things in Israel back to right, to prove to Ahab, if not to Jezebel, the incontrovertible supremacy of YHWH over Ba'al.

This is how the draught and subsequent famine across the land were interpreted, experienced: as evidence of the victory of YHWH over Ba'al. Ba'al was, after all, the god of thunder, the one who could make it rain. So, when it didn't rain and the people really needed it to rain, Ba'al was felt to be falling down on the job, felt to be failing in face of a greater god, and so perhaps wasn't worthy of such sacrifice.

Strange interpretation? Hard to believe? Yes, it is for me. But suppose, for a moment, that all this *was* so. Forget, if you can, please, the problematic aspects of this story—that there's a turf battle going on between gods; that the God whom we know through Jesus and the cross, through the Holy Spirit and the church and the unfolding of history and the work of grace in our lives, is waging a vengeful battle against a tribal god in order to come out on top. Forget all that, and consider this: that, if such a war between super-powers was indeed taking place, then the ones who would suffer it worst are the likes of this widow. Tagging that, now consider this: that, as when kings go to war, it's the foot soldiers who die; and when superpowers engage in their deadly rivalries, it's the most vulnerable in their midst who get crushed; so when the god of rain goes up against the Lord of the Universe, the Living God, and thus makes for draught and famine, that same Lord of the Universe is as concerned with the wellbeing of the widow as he is with defeating Ba'al.

This story seems to imply that Lord understands who truly suffers when superpowers go head-to-head; and that, though the Lord is one of those superpowers, he is also and primarily concerned with how the exercise of power—his power as any power—might trample the last and least.

Imagine if a president who declared war were also *personally* to make provision for the war widows his war would surely create—maybe building a shelter for them off the West Wing.

Imagine if a president who ordered drone strikes were also *personally* to rectify with the children made orphans by such sloppy defense tactics—maybe build homes for them in the Rose Garden and hire staff as loving as his cabinet is smart.

The Lord whose triumph over some puny rain god means the suffering of those relying on this same rain god to, please, just make it rain, makes provision by sending a prophet to make provision of food, water, and sustenance to those who have none because of the triumph that the Lord enjoys.

This is one of those primitive Bible stories that I struggle to believe and also one of those progressive Bible stories that points to something radical about the Living Lord who, though transcendent, yet has the view from below, the view of the downtrodden, the perspective of society's scapegoats whose suffering no one really cares about or, if we care about it, we nonetheless can't really help.

And it's the ambiguity that makes this story sacred scripture. This ambiguity between affirming our primitive notions about a god who acts in the world and on our behalf even over and against other powers in the world, and challenging us into some less primitive, less tribal, less petty understanding of God and how God feels about, and acts for, us: it's this that makes the story of Ba'al and the Lord, Ahab and his queen, the prophet and the widow, sacred scripture of the sort that should abide throughout all time.

That God is overlord and underling: I wonder if it's something of this that Jesus saw when he saw the widow of Nain.

He had, until now, been wandering and wonder-working. Up until now, according to the gospel of Luke, he had been born, baptized, and tested in the wilderness by the devil; he had gone back home to preach in his synagogue where he proclaimed himself to be the one to come and bring good news to the poor and recovery of sight to the blind and release to the

captives, and to declare the year of the Lord's favor; he had freed a few demoniacs and healed a couple of paralytics and stood some more testing, though this from religious authorities.

And then he preached.

The so-called "Sermon on the Mount," as is the main feature of the gospel of Matthew, is in Luke a sermon on a plain. And it's not quite as luminous as the Sermon on the Mount; it's a little less central to this gospel's understanding of who Jesus was and what affect he would have. But it's still substantial and it's still revealing of what paradox and mystery he was to bring—or to reveal, or was it both?

Moreover, if preaching did for him what it does for me, then it was in preaching that Jesus really began to understand: if his work was only about healing this one and freeing that one and winning this argument and defying that laying down of the law, if his work was only about some isolated incidents of repair and restoration, then he wasn't really what the world really needs.

Sure, such a thing would be great for this one healed and that one freed, for this one repaired and that one restored, for this slave risen from death (though to return to his toil?) or for that widow restored to some safety (though still ensnared in a social structure that puts her at risk), but what about the rest of us? What about those who toil as slaves and might desire for something more radical than good health for more work? What about those who live *this* close to the cliff off of which is non-existence?

The world doesn't need a hero for rescuing damsels in distress. The world needs a savior for dismantling the structural and social causes of distress, for planting in their place something wholly and thoroughly good.

I wonder if what Jesus saw when he *saw* that widow and had compassion was now not merely a damsel in distress but a social structure that needed dismantling.

If so, well, that was too much to take on right now. Instead, in compassion, he did what was expedient: he would be the hero, saying to her, "Do not weep," and he came forward and touched the bier and said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" And the young man did. And two lives were saved that day—a good day's work but a thin slice of what lives would be saved a couple years hence.

The cross. The death of God. The resurrection. The Holy Spirit.

I'd understand if Jesus had contented himself in saving a life here and there, if he'd contented himself in a good day's work. I'd understand if he'd chosen not to see the widow, to really *see* the widow, if instead he just saw her immediate need and did what needed to be done to respond to that immediate need. I'd understand because really to see her is also to be indicted by her, by the injustice that made her life a near-death. When evil is structural, it's all of our faults. So, I'd understand if he just decided to wave his hand in an isolated act of magic rather than to let her in—to his sight, to his heart, to his guts (which is where compassion is located, the word compassion being that for guts).

To see this widow is as to be kicked in the guts.

As you know, I sit on the board of Volunteers in Medicine, whose gala is coming up (is *always* coming up), our major fundraiser. And our budget is big this year. The clinic has grown this year, doubled the size; and our clientele is growing—those who are uninsured or underinsured, and whose lives are beleaguered by illness of one sort or another. It's a drag on individual lives, and a drag on our whole little society out here in the Berkshires. Our patients are at the foundations of life here—servers, landscapers, dishwashers, livery drivers and delivery drivers. When one falls out of the fabric of society, whole threads wear and break, whole sections of the fabric come unraveled.

We often discuss at board meetings other organizations' fundraisers. They manage to bring in so much money, we recognize, and so fast. People buy expensive tickets to fashionable parties, and they bid on expensive auction items that are fun and fabulous, and they write big checks to efforts that are all to the good. But many of these organization serve people with, though particular needs, yet needs made by accident or by tragedy, while our patients have needs made by injustice. And that's a much harder sell, a much less fabulous cause—because it's an indictment against us all.

It's just so much easier to look the other way.

It's just so much easier to believe such people have created their own misfortune, such people have made their own way into the pit.

They haven't. In many, many cases, they haven't.

Jesus is remembered to have seen one person in his ministry of wandering and wonder-working, of healing and preaching. In all his encounters, only one remembers him to have *seen* the person with whom he interacted. This is the one; this is her, the widow of Nain.

I wonder what he saw, and I like to think it's this: the fullness of the project laid before him, the very same project laid before us all.

Charity is good; justice is better.

Good work for the sake of this one in need is good; the dismantling of what creates such need is better.

We do what we can, following Jesus' lead. For today, restoration for one; for ever, redemption for all; and in the time that remains, a bridge between what is and what should be, what *will* be.

Thanks be to God.