

February 5, 2017 - Epiphany 5 Communion
"Rise to the Occasion" – Rev. Seth D. Jones ©
Luke 7:1-17

In today's reading, we are presented with these incredible stories of healing and resurrection. They are spectacular. Soon after they are accomplished, the entire countryside knows about them. It is easy to get hung up on the healings themselves; they are important and there are important elements within both stories about the healings, but there is something even more important going on here.

Let's move out from the stories and the spectacular nature of them to what is the same about both stories. There are two things that stay the same in both stories - the presence of the crowd and the presence of Jesus. The crowd bears witness to Jesus' healing of the Centurion's slave and the resurrection of the widow's son. This is important because we need to see that the healings are done for the sake of the crowd, for their benefit. They, and thus we, are meant to see something.

What then do we see with the Centurion?

The Centurion is a man of authority in the Roman military. He oversees armies within the province of Judea. Even so, he has developed a relationship with the Jewish people that has afforded him, and them, a peaceful relationship. He has built a synagogue for them in the town in which the Centurion and his army is garrisoned. The Centurion has garnered the respect of the elders of the community.

It is one thing to garner the respect of the people; it is another entirely to garner the respect of the elders of the community. This is true no matter where a person may live.

The Centurion's slave is sick and near death so he sends the elders to ask for Jesus' help. He trusts in the ability of Jesus to heal.

He trusts so much, he believes Jesus "*need only say the word and my servant will be healed.*" The Centurion doesn't even feel Jesus needs to come to his house. He believes in Jesus' universal power.

The Centurion believes in Jesus and therefore believes in the creative, healing, transformative power of the word of Christ to alter the reality of his servant's situation.

The crowd bears witness to this whole scene, and then Jesus turns to them and says for all to hear, "*Not even in Israel (a place that prides itself on its faith) have I seen such faith.*"

What then do we see with the widow of Nain?

The crowd that has born witness to the healing of the Centurion's slave now bears witness with Jesus to a crowd who is mourning the death of a widow's son. A procession of life meets a procession of death.

This situation is bad news for the widow. Her only son is dead, which means her sole means of survival in a highly patriarchal society is now threatened. The reason the Prophets continually call for the care of the widows and orphans is because the community traditions constantly overwhelm the compassion to which God calls the community. In other words, the death of her only son is a sentence to crushing impoverishment and hunger.

And so Jesus has compassion on the widow, tells her, "*Do not weep*", then touches the bier which carries her son and says, "*I say to you, Rise!*" And the young man arises and speaks. The crowds - the crowd of life and the crowd of death - are consumed with fear. But their fear drives all of them to praise God and recognize Jesus as a great Prophet.

What is the crowd meant to see in these two stories?

What are we meant to see?

Think for a moment about these characters - the Centurion and the widow.

The Centurion is part of the occupying force that has taken over Israel and Judea. He is the will of the Empire over the people. He is a foreign influence on the Jewish people. To the people of the land, he is a threat, an alien presence.

But there are problems with this simplistic view of the Centurion. Yes, he is the presence of the Empire in a foreign land. He is the imposition of the will of Rome upon the Jewish people.

That is all true.

And yet, and yet, he has a good relationship with the elders. He is a contributor to the well-being of the people he oversees. He has built them a synagogue.

The widow is from a well-respected family in the town of Nain. She is a Jewish woman from a Jewish village who is mourning the death of her Jewish son, her only son. She is joined by her village to mourn his death. She is a 'local' who is surrounded by the occupying armies of the Roman Empire.

But there are problems with this simplistic view of the widow. Yes, she is from the village and yes, she is a woman of faith. But she is facing some extreme outcomes due to her condition. Widows were under constant threat in this day and age, as were orphans. The crushing poverty of the region fell first upon them, just as it does in our community today. The faithful widow of the community of faith is facing a future of poverty within the community of which she is a part.

Does that seem right to you?

What then does Jesus intend for the crowds?

Why does Jesus want the crowds to see him healing a slave from the occupying army's leadership and the resurrection of a faithful widow of the Jewish land?

Jesus is calling the crowds and us to rise to the level healing and love rather than descending to the level of argument and division and doubt. Are we, the crowd who bears witness to these events with Jesus, going to rise to the occasion of love and healing and faith, or are we going to descend into division, doubt and despair?

believe Jesus wants the crowd, and us, to see the great difference between these two people, the distance between them in belief, background, and temperament.

The Centurion believes in his work. He understands power. "*When I say 'Go', people go to where I tell them. When I say 'Come', people come to me. When I say 'Do', they do as I ask.*" It is his background - power, leadership, the enforcement of the will of the Empire.

But his temperament is one that leads him to belief in the power of Jesus; not even in the physical presence of Jesus, but simply in the power of Jesus' words.

And this temperament, leads the Centurion to rise above the local prejudices against the Empire, and to rise above the prejudices of the Empire towards those over whom the Empire rules, this foreigner who has power over the people he cares for, the people over whom he has power.

The widow believes in her faith and she is also likely aware of her '*downward mobility*' in her situation. Her background is '*provincial*' in the sense that she probably knows little more than the community she and her only son have been a part of their entire lives. The crowd despairs of the death, and probably also of the future awaiting the widow. The local woman despairs of her son's death and despairs the future lack of care awaiting her.

In the instance of the Centurion, the Centurion rises to the occasion of Jesus' power to heal.

In the instance of the widow, the son rises to the occasion of Jesus' power to give life.

I believe Jesus wants the crowd that follows him to see one more thing. He wants them, and us, to see compassion and the power of compassion.

The word compassion is a Latin conjunction. “*Passion*” means “*to suffer*”; “*com*” means “*with*”. So “*compassion*” means “*to suffer with*”

When Jesus sees the widow in verse 13, the text says, “*He had compassion for her and said, ‘Do not weep’*”. Jesus suffers with the widow. It is the compassion of Jesus for those who suffer that unifies these two stories and I believe this is what Jesus wants them, and us, to see. The compassion of Christ heals and gives life, and it is through the compassion of Christ that we can heal and give life to dysfunctional relationships, illnesses of mind, heart and body, and broken communities.

When the compassion of Jesus is our focus, we rise above provincial sensibilities and traditions, we rise above the national and international politics of the day. We care at a deep and visceral level. In Greek, the word for compassion is *spalnizchomai*. The root word here is *splagna*. The *splagna* are the intestines, and so compassion is the root of where we also get the phrase ‘*gut-wrenching*’.

Compassion is a deep, bodily sensibility that wrenches us out of our political, personal, and power-oriented ways of thinking and being. Compassion drives us to be like Jesus, and also like the Centurion, and also like the widow.

If we wish to rise to the occasion of our present situation, regardless of your belief and background and feelings, the compassion of Jesus is where we will find healing, hope, and life.

Martin Luther spoke of the presence of Jesus Christ in the bread and cup of communion as Jesus being “in, around, and through” the elements. It is the same way with our relationships and our approach to the world. We are, like the Centurion, called to rise to the occasion of Christ’s presence by seeing him in, around and through the situation we inhabit and to which we bear witness. In such a worldview, the power of Jesus’ word alone can be all that is needed.

And like the widow, when the situation has filled us with despair, pain and potential futures of suffering, we are called to bear witness to those who rise to the occasion with the compassion of Christ which also gives life.

These are crazy times we are living through right now. Regardless of your political perspective, conflict and division are the name of the game right now.

I do not foresee it coming to an end soon. It may be that the conflict and division is something you just see on TV and so you do not have to focus or care about the compassion of Christ, except as a distant idea. But maybe the conflict and division of the world has entered your home in unexpected and painful ways. Maybe it is present with friends and groups you associate with on a regular basis.

TS Eliot says, in his poem, Little Gidding,

***‘If you came this way
Taking any route, starting from
Anywhere
At any time or at any season
It would always be the same: you
would have to put off
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to
Kneel
Where prayer has been valid.’***

Through prayer, worship, communion, and fellowship, we continually are exposing ourselves to the presence of Christ's compassion, which is in, around, and through our relationships and world, the common elements of our everyday lives.

We are the crowd who follows Jesus from miracle to miracle, from teaching to teaching, from event to event. What do we see there? How do we see the people involved? What do we think of it all?

Listen deeply for Jesus' words. Pay attention and stay awake!

Watch for the compassion of Christ in, around, and through what is occurring. Become an active participant in that compassion and care at the level of your body and heart. Become a little Christ in situations of great conflict, despair, and brokenness.

And like the Centurion, believe that healing is possible. Believe that healing is possible for the world, the nations of the world, the warring peoples of the world, the conflicts in your community and household, and within yourself. ⁱ

Because this healing is the outcome of the presence of the compassion of Christ. Those who are exposed to Christ's compassion, who suffer with others and bear witness to it will rise to the occasion of the healing and life of God. This healing and new life is God's promise to us through Christ.

Do you want to partake of the promise?

Amen.

ⁱ Ideas for this section taken from *The Hardest Question*, by Lia Scholl. June 3, 2013. Accessed 2/1/2017