

Luke 7:11-17

11 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 city, 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 back 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 countryside.

This was the text of my first sermon at Bethany Presbyterian Church in Bridgeville, Pennsylvania, in the summer of 1977. And as such, it is special to me to be able to reflect on it some 48 years later. Much remains the same, but there are also new emphases that were not on my radar at the time. And what wasn't controversial back then is now. I want to weave into this story items that are as current as today's news.

However, one thing never changes: Jesus is moved to the heart of his being by the needs of a person in dire circumstances.

A quote I came across last week is particularly relevant in relation to this text. It is "over-politicized and under-moralized." This was from David Brooks, who writes for The Atlantic Magazine and The New York Times. He was referring to the church, but I think he could be referring to our society. Politics, not personal morality and ethics, are everywhere. Just watch any news you choose, and chances are you will see blame and shame, but not always high personal standards for integrity and behavior as the talk of the day.

On to the story, as Jesus and his followers are traveling, they come to the village of Nain. There, they encounter a funeral procession, and Jesus comes to a stop.

Periodically, I notice that some people still pull over, when possible, when a funeral procession drives by. In our too busy world, I notice most people don't. Perhaps it's just a result of my southern upbringing, but there's a sense that while it doesn't take much time to show respect, people are just too busy.

Jesus stops and sees a widow and a crowd escorting her and her only son to his burial. I think this is the first miracle here: Jesus stops. He doesn't pass by on his way to somewhere important. He is not too busy. He stops for a woman who is in tears.

A quote I have used before still holds: "Ministry happens during interruptions." The interruptions in our lives are often an opportunity to show compassion, as Jesus did that day.

Jesus is deeply moved by this, not just because of the significant loss, but also because the loss of her only son could be catastrophic. Without a family, she had no means of support. Most widows in Jesus' day were very vulnerable and very poor. And it would not be uncommon for them to be destitute and reduced to begging.

Jesus teaches from the beginning to the end of his ministry that God has a deep concern for the most vulnerable in society, as exemplified by this poor widow.

Most of us know the well-known verse from Scripture that states, "As you did it to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me." Matthew 25:40

This woman fits the description. She not only had no societal status, but she was also not a disciple and was not described as having faith. She is just a poor widow from a small town, but not to Jesus. To him, she is a child of God, and as such, Jesus has a deep concern for her.

When I first preached on this passage, there was no potential for the controversy that exists today. How could a poor widow's son being raised be controversial? Well, not on its own, but widows are joined together with orphans, immigrants, or sojourners. And that last one is controversial today.

Part of Jesus' identity as the Jewish Messiah is rooted in the fundamental story of his people. The Hebrew identity is that they are a people who cried out to God as an enslaved people in Egypt, a place they had emigrated to. God heard their cries of despair and redeemed them to be God's people. Not just there, but throughout Scripture, there is a picture of God being especially focused on those without social standing or support, who are left to fend for themselves. And as they are of special concern to God, they should be of special concern to us.

The scriptures use the three basic classes of people fitting this description: widows, orphans, and immigrants. In Scripture, these people were singled out for special care. They were the defenseless in Jewish society and therefore of special concern for God and God's people. Without a support system, these folks were very vulnerable.

I have a soft spot, I will admit, for immigrants, as my father was one when he was a youngster coming with his family from Vilnius, Lithuania, in the first decade of the twentieth century. I had grown up thinking it was Riga, Latvia, but my older cousin, David, told me it was Lithuania. And thus, I am a first-generation American. Indeed, some of my favorite coins when I was a collector were the 1986 Commemorative Half Dollar and Dollar that featured the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, where my father arrived.

The coins also served to remind me that immigrants are referred to as "those worthy of special care" in scripture. Even Joseph, Mary, and the infant Jesus had to flee their home and become immigrants in Egypt when King Herod the Great tried to kill the infant Jesus.

Other parts of scripture echo this theme.

For example:

Leviticus 19:33-34

³³ "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. ³⁴ The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Jeremiah 7:5-7

⁵ For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, ⁶ if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, ⁷ then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave to your ancestors forever and ever.

Matthew 25:35

³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

Hebrews 13:2

² Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

So, widows, orphans, and immigrants are of special concern to God, referring to a special category of people. That is not to limit God’s special concern to just these people. Still, they serve as a catchphrase for all those who are defenseless and at the mercy of society because of prejudice or limiting conditions perceived or real.

So, Jesus encounters a woman from this class on the path of destitution, with no family or means of support, relying solely on the charity of others.

That is one reason why almsgiving is one of the three pillars of Jewish Piety of the times, along with prayer and fasting. For without almsgiving, she would have no hope. It was an act of piety to help those in need by giving alms. As Jesus stops, the people following him wait to see what he will do.

That is vital; this stop was not on his agenda. He had plans for preaching, teaching, and healing, but the widow and the funeral procession interrupted his plans. As I said, he used this interruption as an opportunity for compassion and ministry.

This occasion gave Jesus the chance to put his plans into action in a slightly different way than he had planned. As Saint Francis was supposed to have said, **“Preach the gospel at all times and use words when necessary.”** Jesus’ pause to help this poor widow spoke just as loudly as any of his teachings. It did then, just as our pause to help does now.

Or to quote Adam Hamilton, “You are the only sermon some people will hear, the only Bible some will read, and the only image of God some will ever see.”

So, Jesus stops and is moved to the depths of his being by this woman’s plight. In his heart, he feels compassion and sees her as a child of God. He meets her needs as he encounters them. He restores her son to her, thus restoring her dignity.

Many times, I have used the Biblical theme that how we see people is vital. How we perceive people, especially those often treated as the least, the lost, the last, and the left behind, is a moral issue.

Here is where that first quote comes in: over-politicized and under-moralized. Our partisan politics are overshadowing our Christian morality. While politics are important, they should not control our morality; instead, our morality should shape our politics. We need to view our politics through the lens of Jesus, not see Jesus through the lens of our politics. And we must see all people as the precious children of God.

Too many of us view as enemies those who disagree with us when we should see each other as children of God. As Ann Lamott says, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”

One of the most egregious examples of being over-politicized and under-moralized, and Ann Lamott's quote, is the Texas Kerr County tragic flooding and loss of life.

When we were at Chautauqua two weeks ago, Lewis Black, the comedian famous for his rants, was featured. Here is my rant on the Texas tragedy, though a little tamer than his.

All too quickly, people sought to find someone to blame instead of focusing on the pain and loss suffered by so many.

Many people should have paused to think before speaking, especially when the tragedy was still so fresh; people were taking political stances instead of focusing on the terrible loss, trauma, and grief. Politics overshadowed morality.

There will be time enough for blame and accountability later. Still, the only people entitled to speak of fault and blame immediately after such a tragedy are the victims who have lost so much, like their homes and family members. Their anger and rage in the face of such loss and trauma are understandable.

The moral position is like that of Jesus, to be moved to the depths of our beings by such hurt and to stop doing what we are doing and find ways to help relieve the suffering. There will be time for politics later.

End of Rant.

Back to the story. Jesus restores the son to his mother as an act of compassion and justice so she can live out her life in dignity. That should be the moral focus of all of us—helping folks live their lives with dignity. The people were amazed then, and they would still be amazed today when others take time to do this.

As the hymn “They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love” declares, “and we’ll guard human dignity and save human pride.”

When we stop to help those in need, we emulate the actions of Jesus. It might just be Jesus we are ministering to. I have told you this story before, but it came to mind again considering this text:

When Marlene and I were on our honeymoon in Europe in the spring and summer of 1971, we were walking down a street in London, England, and encountered a beggar eating a head of lettuce like one would eat a giant apple. We passed by, and Marlene said something to the effect, “What if that was Jesus?” We stopped and went to find him, but he had disappeared. That’s why it is so hard for me to pass by someone seeking a handout, even though I know that they may well be seeking money for drugs or alcohol. I still see Jesus even when I pass by.

And I remember Jesus stopped and met the needs of the woman he encountered, and I think, “Lord, have mercy on me.”

Jesus stopped, and so must we.

Remember Jesus’ words. "As you did it to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to me." Matthew 25:40