

Raising the Widow's Son – Luke 7:1-17

Sometimes I'm not sure how people hear the healing stories in the Bible. In some ways, they may be among the most comforting and hopeful stories. Healing stories can be a part of bedside rituals when visiting the sick. They can be sources of hope in difficult circumstances.

On the other hand, these two stories, and others like them, display some pretty remarkable miracles. What happens when the reader is someone who has not experienced a miracle cure like Centurion's slave did...or someone whose loved one did not experience either cure or this kind of miraculous resuscitation?

And if you just read the first story of today's duo, there are some things that might raise even more questions. For this morning's conversation, we'll lay aside the whole slave question and what is meant by his value. We'll assume this is someone who the Centurion cares about and does not want to lose.

That healing seems almost like a transaction. The Centurion sends Jewish elders who give Jesus all the reasons why this Centurion deserves to have his request granted. He loves the Jewish people and built the synagogue for them, even though he himself was not Jewish.

Then, Jesus is amazed at the faith of the Centurion...greater even than the actual people of Israel.

So a pretty cynical way of hearing the story would be that the Centurion deserves to have his request granted because he is generous and has a strong faith....that healing is in some way dependent on the faith or other qualities of the person asking.

But the widow's story blows that out of the water. She and the community mourning the death of her son didn't make any request. There's no evidence from the story they even expected Jesus to be in Nain that day. There is no proclamation of faith and nothing at all about her financial status or generosity.

Putting the two stories together, we have to conclude that where our attention needs to go is to Jesus, and not to any particular virtue or action of either the Centurion or the widow.

So let's start with sort of a drone's eye view of this. There is some powerful symbolism just in the encounter of these two processions.

Jesus leads one of the processions. He has just healed a person who was near death. There's a crowd following him that has witnessed and heard about that and countless other healings.

Demons that had plagued people for years were cast out. Wherever Jesus goes, he leaves life and healing in his wake.

Imagine that procession as it comes near the town of Nain. Excited chatter about what had happened in Capernaum. Laughter. Maybe singing even. Jesus' procession is a procession radiating life.

As they near the gates of Nain, a very different procession meets them. Somber faces. Weeping and the mournful wails of grief. It is a procession of death. A community has lost one of its own. A widow has lost not only her child, but likely her means of support.

The two processions meet. Jesus' procession grows quiet as the death procession continues its agonizing walk to the cemetery outside the city gate.

Jesus approached the bier on which the young man was lain. He touches the bier, says "Young man I say to you, arise."

And he does.

The procession of life meets the procession of death, and life wins.

Now, let's dial in for a closer view. There's an important word in that story. It's the word compassion.

Com passion – com is a prefix that means with. And passion comes from a root meaning suffer. Compassion means to suffer with.

And in Greek, the word shares a root with the word for intestines. This is a gut-wrenching pain that Jesus feels for this widow who has lost her son.

I believe that the shape Christian faith has taken in our culture is too individualistic. We focus on our own individual salvation and forget that Jesus and the Kingdom of God are about a whole new way of doing life together in the here and now.

But it's still important to recognize that Jesus doesn't have only compassion in general. His compassion focuses on this one particular woman. He looks straight into *her* soul and sees *her* pain.

Jesus enters fully into her suffering...and turns it into joy.

The first story could give us some misguided ideas about how Jesus works. It lifts up sort of a transactional view – if I do the right things, if I'm generous, if I have enough faith – my prayers for healing will be answered.

The second story tells us none of that is true. It was always about Jesus. And most importantly, it's about Jesus' compassion for all of us, whether we've done anything special to earn it or not.

Those two things – the triumph of life over death and Jesus' compassion – give us something to hold on to that goes beyond cure in this life.

In fact, that gut wrenching compassion...that willingness to suffer with us...is what brought Jesus into our world in the first place. The willingness of God to enter into the entire human experience, joy and sorrow, is the reason for the incarnation of the Christ. It's why Jesus was born.

That gut wrenching compassion led Jesus to pour out his divine power to heal. It's what led Jesus to go hang out with the people society rejected...at the risk of his own rejection. It's what led Jesus to give up the glory and joy of divine life to meet us in the pain and messiness of the world.

Ultimately, it's that compassion that led Jesus to his own death. Jesus was willing to experience the very worst that the world has to offer in order to heal.

That promise of healing is still effective.

It's what even now draws the Holy Spirit – Christ born in us – to suffer with us.

When we're sick, when we're dying, when we're mourning the death of someone...Christ comes to us as the Spirit to suffer with us.

But that compassion doesn't stop there. In both the stories today, Jesus speaks and healing happens. The Centurion knows that. He knows that Jesus' word has power to heal.

Sometimes healing comes in very concrete forms. We have all experienced healing from something. God created our body with tremendous capacity to heal built in.

Covid has wreaked havoc. But even with that, most people do recover, many just by the power of their own body's mechanisms.

And the reality is, over the years, humans have learned a great deal about preventing and curing all kinds of sickness and injury. The average life expectancy in first century Palestine was 35. That's not because people couldn't live as long as we do. They did. It's because more people died young...really young. Infant mortality and maternal death in childbirth in particular were much higher, dragging the average down.

Medicine has made great strides in preventing infant and maternal mortality since then. That's part of how God has worked to heal.

More young people died of infectious diseases then. We've also learned a lot about preventing and treating those illnesses too. God works through scientists and those in the healing professions to bring about an awful lot of healing.

But sooner or later, we all get something that won't be cured. We will all experience the death of someone we love...someone who's own cure may have been ardently prayed for.

That's when we hold on to the trust that Jesus' words of healing and life go far beyond just being cured. We begin to see that healing isn't always about cure and that tremendous healing can happen, even when cure doesn't.

And we can trust that ultimate healing awaits us in death. Let's go back to that image of the two processions meeting. When the procession for the widow's dead son meets Jesus' procession of life, the procession of death itself becomes a procession of life. It's a preview of what is to come.

The young man is brought back to life, but this is not yet a resurrected life. He did die again eventually.

But on the cross, something altogether different happened. Jesus' death was transformed to resurrected life. And that resurrected life is the promise that awaits us.

In the meantime, while we are here in this life, we can trust in a God whose compassion meets our pain and sorrow. We can trust that in all the little deaths we experience before the final one, God is working to bring us to something new. We can trust that God sees our pain and does not abandon us.

And we can trust that in Christ, when life meets death, life wins.