

Luke 7: 1-17

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, 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. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 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!" This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

2 Kings 5:1-5a,6-7a,8-12b, 13-14

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, [in Syria,] was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy.

Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." ...

He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? ..."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."

So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ... He turned and went away in a rage.

But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

By this time in the story of Jesus, it has pretty much been established that he can preach, and he can heal people. He seems to do these things wherever he goes. This day, however, Jesus hearkened back to his first sermon that we know about, the one that got him in trouble in Nazareth.¹

This day and every day, Jesus practiced com-*passion*, which literally means, "suffering with someone." There is no such thing as compassion in the abstract. This word is not used many times in the Gospel, but it is here. Every time it is used, the person who feels compassion does not only witness suffering. He or she does something about it.

In that first sermon, Jesus pointed out that God had healed Naaman the Syrian, who was a mighty general of the Israelites' enemies, when he asked the prophet Elisha for healing.² There were indeed many lepers in Judah in Elisha's time, but it was Naaman who asked, and it was Naaman who was healed.

In that same sermon, Jesus pointed out that, "there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah," when Elijah went to a widow of Zarephath in Sidon. Elijah lived

¹ Luke 4:14-30.

² 2 Kings 5:1-19, Luke 4:14-30.

with the widow, and did miracles there, and, when her son died, he raised him from the dead.³

The reason that this particular sermon got him in trouble was that Jesus refused to say what the people wanted to hear. He acknowledged that the Jews were God's chosen people. He refused to say that they were blessed alone among all the nations of the world.

He said instead that God's grace and God's love and God's healing were not just for the descendants of Abraham. He did not say that Jews could not receive God's grace and God's love and God's healing, but he said that these gifts of God were not the sole property of one nation. And he gave examples from the Scriptures – examples that they could neither ignore nor dispute – of how that was so. To people who had grown up believing that these things were their birthright and theirs alone, this was intolerable. They tried unsuccessfully to throw Jesus off a cliff.

This day, Jesus puts his money where his mouth is, putting action to his words.

Jesus is asked to heal the dying slave of a Roman centurion. Now, this particular Roman centurion is a worthy Gentile. He loves the Jewish people. He actually built the synagogue for the people of Capernaum. But he is still a Roman centurion. He is still an officer of the foreign army that is occupying Judea.

The centurion sends some of the Jewish elders to Jesus, asking him to come and heal this slave, because the slave is, "precious to him." So, Jesus goes with the

³ 1 Kings 17

elders, headed to the centurion's house, but the centurion sends friends to tell him not to even come into his house.

The centurion, as a military officer, understands authority, and he understands that Jesus has it. He says to Jesus, "Just say the word, and let my slave be healed."

Jesus hears the whole story, and he has compassion on the centurion's slave, even though he has never, as far as we know, met either the slave or the centurion. He remarks that he has not seen such complete faith in Israel, and he heals the slave at a distance.

We don't know much about this slave. We do not know whether he was Roman, or Syrian, or even Jewish. So, either this slave was another foreigner, or he was a fellow Jew who was effectively helping the foreigners. We know that he was male and that he lived in the household of this centurion and that the centurion called him "precious to him." In any case, he was a cog in the vast Roman machine. His being in the centurion's household made it easier in some way for the centurion to go about his day-to-day job of keeping Judea under Roman control.

But Jesus sees more than the cog. Jesus sees the human being. So Jesus heals him anyway. He restores him to wholeness.

Here is the healing of Naaman the Syrian, in action. Jesus restores to wholeness the slave of this foreign military officer.

Then Jesus goes to a village called Nain, and there he meets a funeral procession. A widow is burying her only son.

In the paternalistic world of the first century, that means that she is burying her livelihood and her protection with him. Some male relative, however distant, now owns all her property, or he will as soon as the legalities get sorted out. He is also responsible for seeing that she is taken care of, but he may or may not even know her, much less feel anything more than a technical legal responsibility for her. This widow has already lost her husband; now she is losing the rest of her world.

Jesus sees this, and, in an instant, he understands the whole situation. He has compassion for the widow, and he raises her son from the dead. He has compassion, meaning he feels suffering with her, and he does something about it. He tells the dead man to rise, and the man sits up and begins to talk with the people around him.

Here we see the healing of the widow's son. Jesus sees the widow's suffering, and he has compassion.

Where in our world are we called to feel compassion? Compassion is not merely saying, "Awww," or sharing a picture on Facebook. That is momentary and almost meaningless. The word compassion means to suffer with someone. Every time you hear someone say the word "compassion," whether they are a clergyperson or a politician, that is what the word means. It is not a word to be used lightly.

Are we, as followers of Jesus Christ, called to suffer with the poor? I believe that we are. Jesus said that, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of

heaven.”⁴ He said that whatever we do to the least of our sisters and brothers, we do to him.⁵

Are we called to suffer with those who are powerless? I believe that we are. Jesus did not come into the world in a Roman palace. He did not spend his time with the rich and powerful. He was born in a stable,⁶ laid in a manger, and spent his life among members of a conquered and abused people. He taught them not how to conquer the world themselves, but to love their neighbors and their enemies, which works well, considering how often those are the same people.⁷

Are we called to suffer with those whose lives have been destroyed by war? I believe that we are. Jesus was himself a refugee from state-sponsored terrorism, when he and his family fled to Egypt to avoid the Slaughter of the Innocents.⁸ The Hebrew law that Jesus fulfilled commands God’s people to love the stranger, the alien, among them.⁹ Jesus spoke of a duty to welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, and feed the hungry. He said that, when we do that, we welcome, clothe, and feed Him.¹⁰

⁴ Matthew 5:3.

⁵ Matthew 25:31-46. See also the justice due to the poor in Exodus 23.

⁶ Yes, I know, the Bible does not actually say, “stable.” However, he was born in a place where animals were taken care of, as witness the presence of a manger. For these purposes, that is close enough.

⁷ G.K. Chesterton.

⁸ Matthew 2: 12-23.

⁹ Deuteronomy 10: 18-19.

¹⁰ Matthew 25:31-46.

Today, in 2017, we are in the middle of the largest refugee crisis since the Second World War.^{11,12,13,14} I know that some have recently said that welcoming refugees is, “not a Bible issue.”¹⁵ This is one reason that I challenged you all to read the Bible last year, and to continue reading it. So many people make claims about what the Bible says. Look it up, and decide for yourself, whether these people know what the Bible says.

The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ has compassion on us. When we suffer, he suffers with us. Because he has compassion, he did something about it, and he does something about it. Jesus walks with us through our dark valleys, and he does not stop when our sisters and brothers do.

If we are the followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to have compassion on those who are suffering. All those who are suffering. Because when we do that, we have compassion on Christ himself.

Whether they look like us or not. Jesus didn’t – he was a Middle Eastern Jew.¹⁶

Whether they speak our language or not. Jesus never spoke a word of English.¹⁷

¹¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/all/2015/08/the-global-refugee-crisis/402718/> .

¹² https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/09/world/migrants-global-refugee-crisis-mediterranean-ukraine-syria-rohingya-malaysia-iraq.html?_r=0

¹³ <https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syria-refugee-crisis-war-facts>

¹⁴ <https://www.rescue.org/topic/refugee-crisis-europe-middle-east>.

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<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/franklin.graham.defends.trumps.ban.on.refugees.its.not.a.bible.issue/104182.htm>

¹⁶ If Jesus had not looked like the Jews around him, the Gospels would mention that oddity.

¹⁷ The language we would recognize as English did not yet even exist. Its antecedent languages were tribal languages spoken in Britain and Gaul, far from Judea.

Whether they worship God in the way that we do or not. Jesus worshipped in the Temple, using rituals that have not been performed in nearly two thousand years.¹⁸

These are all distractions from our sisters and brothers, made in God's image, suffering.

If we have compassion, let us do something about it.

AMEN.

¹⁸ The Temple was destroyed in 70 AD. The Temple rituals cannot be performed anywhere else, which is why modern Judaism has different worship practices – no animal sacrifice, for example.