

Moved by Compassion

sermon digest

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Luke 7:1-17
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If you could make one wish to change the world, what would it be? Would you wish for a peace that would bring an end to the long and tragic enmity in the Middle East? Or perhaps an end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? Would you wish for an end to world hunger, a cure for cancer and AIDS? Would you wish for decent medical care and a simple, decent place for everyone upon the face of God's good earth to live? Perhaps you would look toward an end to the brutality and deep, deep suffering in Darfur and the Congo. Or a speedy and effective solution to the oil crisis that is threatening devastating damage along the Gulf coast.

Given an opportunity by the Technical, Entertainment, Design (TED) organization to experience the fulfillment of one wish for the world, esteemed author Karen Armstrong focused on the matter of compassion. Disillusioned by religious faith as she left the convent in the days before Vatican Council II reforms, Armstrong found her way back to valuing religious faith by way of a journey through the Abrahamic religions. As she came to realize the deeply shared heritage and values of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, she felt more and more deeply the tragedy of their family feud. Selected in 2008 as the honoree to receive help from member businesses and organizations of TED to mount a world campaign on behalf of one central, all-consuming desire, Armstrong asked for an opportunity to bring together the great leaders of the Abrahamic traditions to work together on behalf of what she considered their central, overriding ideal—a call to the fundamental commitment to and practice of the religions' ideal of compassion. As she worked with TED to flesh out her wish, it broadened, for the core value of compassion was central not just to the religions of Abraham, but to all of the world's great religions and ethical systems. Thus, the resulting Charter for Compassion begins with these words:

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

--CharterforCompassion.org

More than forty-eight thousand people around the world have signed the Charter since its release last December, including around forty women in our Women's Interfaith Dialogue. In the coming weeks and months, a number of congregations and other organizations in our community will be inviting signatures as well.

Is this another pipe dream? Will it make a small flash in the pan and then quietly fade from the scene? Is there truly anything here that is central to our faith, or are we merely riding the wave of the moment?

How we choose to answer those questions depends on how attentive we are to our own faith. Far from being lured into something that turns us aside for the central business of the Christian faith, putting the practice of compassion at the front and center of who we are and what we do is in keeping with the drumbeat of the gospel. As a matter of fact, it is in keeping with the drumbeat of the Torah, the prophets, the Gospels, the Epistles, the call of Jesus—you name it. "Religion," the Epistle of James tells us, "that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (1:27). Concern for the widow and the orphan, for the poor and oppressed, for the alien in one's homeland reaches into the deep recesses of Israel's faith. If today we consider in any way that the bar has been lowered in our own faith and practice, it was not lowered by Jesus.

The Gospel of Luke is regarded as a gospel for the weak and oppressed, a word of profound hope for those lacking in power, those often pushed to the margins of society. Jesus, Luke is concerned to say, does not keep with the dictates of society. He does not cater to those who consider themselves deserving of being catered. Throughout, Luke depicts Jesus and those who would be his loyal disciples as being those who see those whom others would shut out of the picture. They see people who others try with all their might to render invisible.

Wrapping up the Sermon on the Plain in which he has spoken blessings on the poor, the hungry, and the despised and counseled those who would please God to practice God's compassion, Jesus enters Capernaum. He is met by Jewish leaders making an appeal on behalf of a good man, a centurion, who requests that Jesus come and heal a beloved slave. In that culture of enmity, the man on behalf of whom the messengers pled was not just *any* Roman, but a *good* Roman—an oxymoron the more religious people of the day would have insisted. He was a man of power who loved not only the slave for whom he sought help, but of all things, the Jewish people themselves. Mostly out of the picture, mostly there to put roadblocks in front of the Jewish people, this Roman rather than sneering at them had actually built them a synagogue. (Similarities between this man and the centurion Cornelius, whose story Luke relates in Acts, are hard to miss. Check Acts 10 when you have a chance and make a comparison.) Luke, it seems, is trying to make a point. This man is so responsive to Jewish sensibilities that he withdraws his request that Jesus come into his home and asks that Jesus merely speak his healing word from a respectable distance. This man from whom nothing is expected other than trouble is the object of Jesus compassion and praise. What a surprising turn of events!

Enter the widow whose only son has died. Again, too many similarities exist to consider Luke's depiction here an

accident. Reminiscent of the widow Elijah also encounters at the city gate, whose only son also dies, only to be restored by the prophet “back to his mother,” the widow represents the dire need of widows throughout scripture. That this is her *only* son, her only claim as a woman to a means of support, underscores her plight. That she is from a small, inconsequential village and, unlike the centurion, has no advocate to plead her case speaks of her situation of stark powerlessness. For all practical purposes, she could well have been invisible to Jesus and his entourage as they made their way through the crowds. And yet, again, Jesus sees her—really sees her. He recognizes her plight and moved with compassion, restores her son to her.

At this point we could break down into speculation about whether he actually did or did not bring the son back to life. We could wonder if the son were actually dead, after all; or we could think in terms of a resuscitation that has some scientific explanation. Those questions are not forbidden, and we are not forbidden to read this or other miracle stories with some doubts in our mind about what actually transpired. If we stop there, however, we’ve missed a pretty important boat. If we stop there, we miss a critical point, not just about who Jesus is, but about who we as his followers are to be as well. Take the story, if you will, as a parable. Take it as bearing a message that goes beyond what we can and cannot prove. Take it as a message that comes out of a different era than ours and perhaps takes some turns we would rather not take, but take it as saying something critically important both about who God is and who we who would serve God must be in turn.

Remember James’ admonition? “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress” (1:27). “Had Jesus passed by that funeral procession on the other side when he had the power to stop it,” Alan Culpepper insists, “none of his other works would have made much difference. If religion has nothing to say to a grieving widow, it has nothing to say” [*New Interpreter’s Bible*, IX, 159].

And what does Jesus and his church have to say to widows and, for that matter, to orphans, slaves, and centurions? Hope in the face of death? Hope that survives death and hopes still? Yes. We might use different imagery from that of the first century, and we may differ from one another about just what the nature of that hope is, but hope that enables us to look the worst that life can hand us and go on hoping still is a fundamental component of our faith.

This hope, however, is not just about the sweet by-and-by. It is also about the difficult and even treacherous here-and-now. It is not hope as wishful thinking. It is, in the words of Clarence Jordan, about “the turning of dreams into deeds” and “betting your life on the unseen realities” [*Cotton Patch Version of Hebrews* 11:1]. It is about looking the injustices and suffering of our world in the eye and extending every fiber of our beings to make a difference. Hope is about compassion embodied in the committed, long term, day-by-day exertion of our very lives.

“Nothing,” the esteemed James Muilenburg tells us, “is more clear than that the God of Israel has a special concern for the weak, the poor, the disinherited, the alien, and all who stand in need” [*The Way of Israel*, 72]. What about the God of Jesus and his body, the church?

“Compassion,” Karen Armstrong insists, “was the litmus test for the prophets of Israel, for the rabbis of the Talmud, for Jesus, for Paul, and for Muhammad, not to mention Confucius, Lao-tzu, the Buddha, or the sages of the Upanishads” [Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase*, 2004]. What about Carolyn Dipboye? What about Rodney and Susan Parrish? What about Anna Kate Teague, Grant Stradley, and Victoria Medaglia? What about Grace Covenant Church?

“We will be an ecumenical church, joining hands with other people of faith and all people of good will to bring healing among God’s children.” So says our Grace Covenant. What about our lives? Our priorities? Our presence right here in the midst of our community and the world? If one thing could be said about us, could it be that day-in-and-out we are moved, motivated and thoroughly shaped by a consuming desire to give expression to God’s compassion in all we are and do? If so, may God grant us the strength and vision for the living of these days. If not, why?