

“The Beauty of Compassion”

Luke 7:11-17

[Scripture Intro]

Hi everyone. My name is Joe Congdon. Some of you may not know me. I am a church planter working within the same network of churches, and we are currently planting a new church in the Matsubara neighborhood of Setagaya. And I am really happy to be able to open God’s word with you today.

Have you ever been the recipient of a random act of kindness? One time I remember being in the car with my mom when I was a little kid. We got stuck in a flash flood and our car couldn’t move. We were hopeless and had no idea what to do. Then out of the blue, out of nowhere, a man we had never met walked through knee-deep water and hooked our car up to his and towed us to safety. And then he just drove away. We were stunned. That was over thirty years ago and I still remember vividly his kindness. Maybe you’re here this morning and you think, you know, in this day and age we could really use more of that. Or, I could really use some compassion like that today. I have some good news for you. Let’s read our passage together.

Luke 7:11-17

¹¹Soon afterward[a] he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. ¹²As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. ¹³And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.” ¹⁴Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” ¹⁵And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus[b] gave him to his mother. ¹⁶Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” and “God has visited his people!” ¹⁷And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country.

Isaiah 40:8

The grass withers and the flower fades but the word of our God will stand forever.

[Prayer]

Let’s pray. Heavenly Father, we bless your name. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight today. In Jesus name, amen. (Psalm 19:14)

[Sermon Intro]

There was a study conducted by some sociologists in which they had a number of seminary students each prepare a sermon on The Good Samaritan. You may remember this passage from Luke 10 in which Jesus, through the example of the Samaritan teaches that everyone is our neighbor and worthy of our attention, care, and love. Once their sermons were prepared, one by one the preachers were rushed off to the chapel to preach. But as they left they were told that they were very late. In a hurry, on their way there they were funneled through an alleyway where a man was hunched over on the ground, moaning and coughing. The goal of the study was to see if people thinking “religious” thoughts were more likely to help those in need.

So what were the results of this test? Well, the majority of these preachers offered no help to the man in need. Some of them even stepped over the man to get to the chapel. I honestly wonder how I would have performed in this experiment. I live with my family of course; I see them everyday, but if I am honest, I sometimes allow myself to just get too busy to pay attention to them. Life in Tokyo can be very stressful, busy, and fast-paced. This often leaves us feeling like we don't have the bandwidth to really be attentive to others. And the sad thing is that the net result of everyone having this attitude is that we're all left feeling alone and needy. How about you? How are you doing in loving your neighbor? How are you doing loving even your family or close friends? Do you feel like your emotional cup is full enough to afford you the energy to care for others today?

Thankfully, the Lord hasn't left us to fend for ourselves. Thankfully, we worship a Savior who has done something to solve our "love" problem, because frankly, we are a mess. But it is compassion that reflects the deepest heart of Christ, and that is what the Lord wants us to see today.

In three parts I want to look at (1) the need for his compassion, (2) the focus of his compassion, and finally, (3) the impact of his compassion.

[Main Point I - The Need for His Compassion] (vv.10-11)

We pick up this narrative soon after Jesus has delivered his most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. In the days after, Jesus is unfolding for the crowd all of the implications of his words in the sermon - he is showing them how to love. He is traveling down from Capernaum with, what the text calls, a "great crowd" (v.11). With him were his disciples, some of his other followers, and even some skeptics and gentiles. All told, there were roughly 1,000 to 2,000 people with him.

They make the trip from Capernaum to Nain, which is about 19 kilometers (12 miles) away. Verse 2 makes it clear that as they approach the gate of the town they find quite a scene. There is a funeral taking place. Jewish funerals happened very soon after the person had died, usually in the early evening around 6:00 pm.¹ The whole town would have been in attendance, about 400 people walking in procession almost like a parade through the town, out of the gate heading east toward the burial ground. The procession would have been led by the widow and the other women of the town, followed by the body of the young man who would have been carried upon something like a stretcher. Behind the body in the procession would have been professional wailers, perhaps also some also playing flutes. They were hired sometimes to lead the crowd in their own wailing and grief. The whole rest of the town would have followed. As a culture this was appropriate mourning for them. You may have seen on the news in the Middle East when great crowds are making a lot of noise in the streets after someone has been killed. Often times those are funeral processions practicing in much the same way that they would have in first century Israel.

Funerals are always sad, always a cause for grief and sorrow. But this funeral, this is a particularly sad situation. The reason being that the man who had died was a young man,² the only son of a widow. These words in verse 2 are incredibly heavy with grief and sadness because it means that this poor widow has lost everything. She had formerly lost her husband, and now she has lost the only other man in her life. For women of the culture at that time, this meant that she had lost all hope for security, safety, provision, all hope that she would be taken care of. She was in an unimaginably precarious, vulnerable place in life. This is a particularly sad funeral.

So we have to appreciate what a crazy scene this would have been. Jesus is

followed by a crowd of thousands, hungry, tired and thirsty after a long walk. They are hanging on his every word, watching his every action like an eagle to see what he is going to do. As they walk from the northeast, they meet another huge crowd coming out of the city, wailing loudly because of the death of this young man. It was more than likely very loud and chaotic. But in the Lord's providence, he controls his own entry into the town at just this moment.

Jesus is surrounded by incredible need all around him. And if we think about it, I think we can say that we often find ourselves in similar positions everyday, overwhelmed by incredible needs. Everyday we are confronted by life's profound questions, people in need of help. None of us are strangers to life's saddest situations and trauma. People are begging for compassion around us every single day. It is not a stretch to say that, in so many words, people are asking you everyday to share the gospel with them. They are curious if you will see them. If you will care about their need. Even in your own home, or in your office, the people that cross your path everyday long for compassion. The need for compassion is just overwhelming sometimes. And so like the crowds, we wonder what Jesus will do about the pain. Can he do anything about our needs?

¹ Much of my background here on first century Jewish funerals comes from the work of Paul Miller in *The Person of Jesus: A Study of Love, Unit One: Compassion, Leader's Manual, See Jesus* (2020), pp.2-14.

² See Jesus' words in v.14, νεανίσκος.

[Main Point II - The Focus of His Compassion] (vv.13-15)

Verse 13 tells us that when the Lord saw this widow, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." These aren't scolding words, but much like when I tell my kids not to cry after they fall down at the park. The reason I can say that is because I know it is going to be ok. They are comforting words of assurance that communicate Jesus' compassion care. Jesus knows that it is going to be ok; he knows he is going to meet all of her needs.

What Jesus does next is rather odd. He passes the widow in the procession and walks up to the bier³ and touches it. The immediately result is that this stops the procession. Up until this point they had all been moving, even with the approach of Jesus and his crowd. And with just his words in verse 14, Jesus raises him from the dead. "Young man, I say to you, arise." The man begins to talk, and Jesus walks him back to his mother.

Surely, this miracle that Jesus has performed was an incredible act of kindness toward the son. However, if we look at the movement of Christ, we see that it is not the son at all who is the focus. His focus is the widow. We see that this is not as much a story about an incredible resurrection miracle (as spectacular as that is!), but Jesus' driving force here is to have supernatural compassion on a woman who is in the most unimaginably needy place in life. She has lost all hope. She is a mess, probably doomed to a life of poverty and danger. And nothing gives Jesus more joy than to step into her mess and show her compassion.

This word, compassion, is interesting in the original language as it comes from the root of the word for "guts." It is something that is felt deeply in our bowels. It is connected in Hebrew to the root for the word, "womb," so we see how compassion is connected to life. It is a strong emotion that draws us to action to help, heal, nurture, and protect. To have compassion on someone grieving is to grieve with them, to enter into the pain

and sit there with them. This is exactly what Jesus does for the widow, and it is what Jesus most longs to do for us as well.

Do you feel like a mess today? If you feel unloved today, if you feel like you could use some kindness or compassion, I want you to know that Jesus sees you. Brothers and sisters, I am talking to you. Do you know that Jesus sees you? Just as clearly as he saw this woman, Jesus sees your situation, and he wants to meet you there. You can be confident he knows what it is like to feel weak, needy, broken, betrayed, and ignored. And not only does he want to sit there with you, but he wants to do something about it. Your problems, your relationships, your job, your family, your situation might feel like a mess right now, completely hopeless, but Jesus' concern and compassion for you are just as strong now as it was then for this widow. Would you let him help you? Will you trust Jesus with your mess? If you're here today and you're not a Christian, I want to invite you to see the incredible compassion of Christ. All he asks us to do is to respond by hearing him and believing. He asks us to trust in his power to help and save, and he will not fail you.

In the Old Testament law⁴ touching a dead body would make one unclean. But Jesus has the opposite effect on death here. He is the one who brings life from death. He wants you to know that he will not shrink from death and the grave to obtain life for you. In fact, the Bible tells us that when we are in our deepest moments of need, his delight to save and help us is all the more pronounced.⁵

3 This was used in lieu of a coffin. As I mentioned above, it was usually an open wicker cot, much like a stretcher. So, Jesus could have easily reached out to touch it or the body.

4 Numbers 19:11, 16

5 See Outland, Dane. *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2020, particularly Chapter 7. "The sins of those who belong to God open the floodgates of his heart of compassion for us. The dam breaks. It is not our loveliness that wins his love. It is our unloveliness" (75).

[Main Point III - The Impact of His Compassion] (vv.16-17)

So, what now? We've seen the need for his compassion (everyone), and the focus of his compassion (you), what is the impact of his compassion? Well, the people who witness this miracle are understandably amazed. Verse 16 explains that, "Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying 'A great prophet has arisen among us!'" The crowds know that they have witnessed a divine miracle, and it must have brought an element of fear. But there are different kinds of fear. If we don't know God, seeing him work may make us uneasy or scared. However, for believers in Jesus, this fear is a way to express our reverence and worship. It is a way to describe our humility before a holy, just, and mighty God. And we see that this is the case for most of the crowd because it moves them to worship.

They exclaim, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" Now, this crowd was probably especially sensitive to the work of the prophets of God because centuries earlier the prophets Elijah and Elisha had worked not too far away. On top of that, both of them had performed the miracle of raising a young man from the dead. Elijah raised to life the only son of a widow. And Elisha raised a boy back from the dead in Shunem, which was only 6 kilometers away. Jesus is connecting himself to their work, but with one big difference. Elijah and Elisha needed to call on the Lord to raise from the dead, and here Jesus does it by himself with just his words. Notice that Luke calls Jesus "Lord" in verse 13. It is possible in their naming him as a great prophet that they see him as the promised

Savior, the great prophet that Moses said would come in Deuteronomy 18.

When they exclaim in v.16 that, "God has visited his people!" They see Jesus' coming as an expression of the kindness of the Lord to them. The Lord has not forgotten about them. Being raised in Israel, they knew of the promises of God, that even more compassion, healing, and restoration was to come with the promised Savior. And the most natural impact of this compassion is that they would start to spread this incredible news.

As God's people today, we are called to the same reaction. We have seen even more than these crowds have. We know the next few chapters of the story. We know of Jesus' descent into death on the cross and and of his resurrection. We know of him sending his Spirit to the church and his command to make disciples of the nations. God has visited us, and now we get to play a part in the story. This is our story.

But sometimes I fear our focus on our own needs can prevent us from being sensitive to the needs of others. It is so easy to forget that we are not the only ones who are suffering, but we're all going through unique trials. Can you ask Jesus to give you eyes to see the needs of others around you? For Jesus, his love began by just looking at the widow. Maybe an easy first step would be just look at someone, to see them, to ask how you might serve them. Maybe you can start with greeting someone you don't know, or asking someone to coffee. Cooking a meal for a friend in need? Taking the initiative with someone who isn't like you? Just showing interest in someone's life can be enough to communicate powerful love and care. When everyone's life around us is a mess, sometimes the smallest act of compassion can make an incredible difference. It starts with looking and the Spirit of Jesus will lead you as to how to help. We may not be able to raise others from the dead, but we can give them Jesus, we can point them to the One who loved us when we were unlovable. We can point them to the only infinite source of compassion.

[Conclusion]

It is easy to have compassion on cute kids and kittens. It is easy to be kind to those who are like us. But the great beauty of compassion is seen when it is expressed toward the undesirable. Do you see it here? Jesus steps into the life of a woman who was nobody by society's standards. She was in the most broken cultural situation imaginable. Jesus sees her, has compassion on her, and he helps her. We're never going to have the power to love the undesirable until we see that this is what he has done the same for us. We are the undesirable ones, but the beauty of his compassion changes us. We must see that Jesus comes to us not *in spite of* our struggle but *precisely because of it*.

One of my favorite movies from last year was called *The Painter and the Thief*. It is a Norwegian documentary about a painter named Barbara who has some of her paintings stolen from a gallery. It's a true story. For an artist, this is a horribly personal and hurtful crime. But instead of just feeling sorry for herself, Barbara is curious about the thief. After he is released from jail she pursues him and actually befriends him. She wants to understand him and eventually does one of the most incredibly compassionate things imaginable, she paints his portrait. The most moving scene of the movie is when she invites Bertil, the thief, over to her studio to show him this portrait she has painted of him. When he sees it, he is shocked into silence. And then he just begins to weep. He cries and cries, saying, "No, no," because he knows that he could never deserve such compassion. He stole from her, he hurt her, but in return she sees him, pursues him and helps him. Bertil's life is changed forever by her compassion.

Jesus sees you today. He knows you're hurting. He knows you may have even

been the cause of many of your problems. In the cross we see his loudest response to us is compassion, love and mercy. And when we receive this from him, we too will be changed.

[Prayer]

Let's pray together. Lord have mercy on us. We know the things we have done, the decisions we have made make us unlikely candidates to be called to join your family. But in your great kindness and compassion, you welcome us with open arms. Help us to receive all that you offer us in Christ. Tear down the barriers. Change us with your love, that our church might be a place known by the warmth and loving compassion of Jesus. Thank you for seeing us. Thank you for sending Christ so that we could be made new, so that we can have hope. Help us, we pray in Jesus' name, amen.

[Institution of the Lord's Supper]

I'm so glad that we get to move to the Lord's table now, because no doubt many of you have been listening about Jesus' compassion for 30 minutes now and you still doubt. That's ok. Jesus sees that too and he doesn't turn away. Before he died on the cross he knew all of our sins, past, present and future. He knew we would struggle to love, and he knew we would struggle to even receive love and kindness from him. He knew it all, because he sees you. The Apostle Paul says he went to the cross for the joy set before him, the joy of accomplishing salvation for you. Remember he died for the ungodly, not for those who think they don't need compassion. We may shy away from broken people because they make us uncomfortable. But Jesus moves towards them.

Do you struggle to feel seen and loved? He wants to give you a tangible sign today, something you can hold, taste, and eat - a sign of the covenant, so that your faith might be strengthened. Communion is one of the means of grace offered to us in the church. We shouldn't be surprised when we feel unloved by Jesus if we're ignoring his means of grace. It would be like a wife saying she doesn't feel loved by her husband when all the while she is ignoring him and forsaking the things he loves. Let's turn to Jesus afresh today, commune with him in prayer (a means of grace), and receive the spiritual nourishment he intends for us in communion.

He has given us this bread as a sign of his body broken for us. And this cup is a sign of his blood that was shed for us, our Savior Jesus who gave his life for the sins of the world.

[Prayer] Let's pray. Lord, our God, send your Holy Spirit so that this bread and cup may be for us the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Heavenly Father, this morning we ask you to show us the true beauty of your compassion. To those who feel forgotten and unloved, reveal yourself. For those of us who have not pursued you as we should, forgive us. For those of us who struggle to love others we ask you to give us courage by the Spirit of your Son working in us. Strengthen us with this meal, that we might have the faith needed to show compassion to your world. Nourish us, that we might truly see how you meet all of our deepest needs in Christ.