

Pentecost 3 (proper 5) June 9, 2013 Luke 7:11-17 - The Widow of Nain
Nigel Taber-Hamilton

It's hard to listen to stories where a single mother loses her only son. Any parent who has lost a child – no matter if that child is their only child or one of several – will tell you that it's a horrendous experience that leaves deep scars – often the worst experience of their lives.

But in the 1st Century world – or that of the Prophet Elijah centuries earlier – it wasn't true that all losses were equal. Women in the Mediterranean world were always under the care of a key man in their lives: father, brother, husband, or son.

We miss that in part because the women around Jesus were so counter-cultural: strong, independent, intelligent and not afraid to show it, and because we're unfamiliar with that social context – we look at it with our 21st Century eyes.

The reality for most 1st Century women was that the absence of a male in their life would have made them not only highly vulnerable but also potentially destitute. That's the reality for both the woman in the two, very similar, stories we've just heard when they contemplated the loss of their only sons.

Not only had each lost the primary male obliged to look after her – her husband – but now each had lost her only son, her only source of support and her last connection to her husband's family – meaning, most likely, her last connection with any family..

Let's stay focused on the Widow in today's gospel. She may have had daughters, but in the 1st Century world daughters were of little help. If single, they were as vulnerable as the widow. If married, they had already transferred to their husband's family. So the widow of Nain was in a desperate place.

There are occasions – even today, when we in the 1st & 2nd Worlds live out of a more equitable understanding of women's and men's identity and worth – there are occasions when we understand that desperate place because we see it: a single, aged mother losing her only son or daughter; the only person, perhaps, that she can rely on in her old age. So perhaps we can understand this widow's double anguish for the loss of her son AND the loss of any meaningful future.

While Jesus had brothers his mother was a widow. You can see in this story the recognition of what the loss of her only son meant to her. So Jesus did something he didn't usually do. "What was that?" you ask? Think about last week – the Centurion **sent** his people to Jesus to **ask for help**. That was the usual pattern in the gospels – people came asking for healing and Jesus responded. But here, Jesus wasn't asked. Here, moved to compassion by the sight of this widow following her only son's bier, he responded.

In antiquity, healing was understood as the restoration of meaning to life. So think of what Jesus did as a "restoration" – ultimately the son - like all of us – will die. One clear irony here is that

the son was likely simply restored to a comfortably secure male existence in Mediterranean culture.

The widowed mother, on the other hand, who lost her son, lost everything of value in her world. The story is clear that the son was dead. What is now clear, I hope, is that **so too was his mother**. Though she still possessed physical life, **that life was bereft of meaning**. To have her son restored by Jesus was to have been given a new lease on meaningful life in that world.

That's another way of saying that the central figure who is restored to life in this story is not the son, but the mother, and that **this story is therefore and most importantly about the creative transformation of human grief into joy**.

There's another irony, too – this one for us and our world. For all the wonderful things that scientific method has bestowed upon us, it has, by its very nature, also and often robbed us of the ability to see dimensions of life beyond the literal, beyond the “it's only real if I can see it and touch it”, dimensions that speak of meaning and transformation. In those other dimensions, there is the real potential for restoration, for celebration and for joy because they have to do with meaning and transformation. We miss that part of this story for this reason.

Every story involving Jesus has a hinge – a place where things change. Looking at that hinge often reveals what's most important. The point in this story when everything changes, the doorway into those other dimensions, is the point at which, as Luke describes it, Jesus “had compassion for [the widow]”. Everything that happens after that moment is centered on the process of creative transformation for both the son AND the widow.

What does that mean for us? That what lies at the center of Christian identity is compassion. Luke claims as much earlier in his gospel, when he reports Jesus as telling his disciples to “be compassionate, as your heavenly father is compassionate.” For us, in this story and in our lives, **compassion is a quality which calls us to become partners with God in effecting creative transformation in our world**.

Every moment in every day provides opportunity for us to discern how best to respond to God's lure toward that creative transformation. It's rare that a day will go by without some opportunity to place ourselves in someone else's shoes through the spiritual practice of compassion. That's what today's collect encourages, an ongoing discernment toward compassion: “...Grant that by your inspiration we may think those things that are right, and by your merciful guiding may do them...”

We may not be called on in our daily living physically to resuscitate someone from death or life-threatening conditions. But we **are** called upon to do so in all of the different ways that we as human beings can be restored from death; we are called on daily – Luke reminds us – to live in solidarity with those whose life circumstances are more vulnerable than our own, and to help make their lives better in some way.

To pray for the discernment to see things that way, and to act accordingly, is at the center of

embodying compassion, and **being a partner with God in the ongoing work of creative transformation.** To be a Christian is to be called into exactly that ministry: we are all ministers of creative transformation. May you now see that in your lives, as surely we now see that Jesus was in his. Amen.