

LUKE 7:11-17
THE STORY OF COMPASSION

“I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.” Those are the words of a man named Nicholas, after the death of his 25-year old son.

We are now walking through the third of five scenes of the story of our God, our world and our lives. This is the scene of redemption, where God rescues us from our sin and frees us to serve him. We are learning about this scene by journeying with Jesus as he meets people and reveals the glory of his redemption.

Last week, we met the centurion, and we discovered that redemption comes through faith - a faith that confesses who I am in my sinfulness, and a faith that professes who Jesus is, in his exalted place and saving power. Right after the story of the centurion, we read the story of this woman. Luke does not give us her name, so let's call her Naomi, for like the Naomi in the book of Ruth, she is a widow who is mourning the loss of a son. As we journey with Jesus to her, we discover more of how the redemption of Jesus enters her story and our story.

Let's begin with **HER STORY**. The start of her story is the story of *HER LOSS*. She lives in the town of Nain. This is a little-known town just a few miles from Nazareth, where Jesus grew up. As Jesus prepares to enter Nain through the town gate, he sees a funeral procession coming the other way. The mourners and the crowd are apparently getting ready to bury the dead person. This young man is being carried in a coffin that is probably just a frame, with his body wrapped in a shroud.

Naomi's loss is a great loss - in several ways.

Her loss is a financial loss. Her husband has died, and now her only son has died. This means she has lost her only means of financial support. We do not know if she is alone, or if she has daughters or even grandchildren under her care. Today, when a woman is left as the “breadwinner” for her household, it is not easy, yet she has options for employment. But Naomi has little or no way to earn a living and provide for herself and any other needy relatives.

Her loss is a social loss. When Jesus meets her, she is surrounded by the people of her town. They will help her, but she will be dependent upon their generosity. We do not know if she is a prominent woman, or just another person. But now that she will have to rely on the care of others, she will lose whatever social status she may have enjoyed.

But most of all, her loss is an emotional loss. First her husband has died, and now her son - her only son. Her life with him is over, and the family line will apparently end. Unless he has male children, the name she received in marriage will be no more. Like Nicholas, Naomi is in a desperate, lonely place. She needs someone to come close to her - to sit beside her on her mourning bench.

Yet her story is not just a story of her loss. It is also a story of *HIS CARE*. This simple story is the story of Jesus' care and compassion for this widow. Jesus comes toward the funeral procession with a crowd of his own. He is pretty popular during this season of his ministry. As he sees her and the crowd with her, how does he respond?

He responds with his heart. We read, “When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her...” The word Luke uses here can also be translated “compassion.” What exactly is this? Think of it this way: this is when you see someone suffering, and you are moved inwardly by what you see. You may literally feel it in your gut, and you will surely feel it in your spirit. That is what happens to Jesus when he sees this woman.

He also responds with his hands. After Jesus speaks briefly to the woman, we read that he goes up and touches the coffin. We may think nothing of this detail, but both crowds would have immediately realized the significance of this. In Jewish law, touching a coffin made a person ceremonially unclean. For a period of time, the unclean person could not participate in the outward rituals of the faith. But Jesus does not worry about this, because he is caring for her.

He also responds with his hope. He says to Naomi, “Don’t cry.” Is he saying that it is wrong to cry when you have lost a loved one to death? Of course not - in John’s gospel, when Jesus comes to the tomb of his friend Lazarus, he weeps. Jesus tells her not to cry, because he is about to remove her tears. In a moment, she will not need to cry anymore.

Finally, he responds with his healing. He touches the coffin, and the people carrying the coffin stand still. He says for all to hear, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” The young man sits up and begins to talk. Jesus returns the young man to his mother. He has been healed of whatever has caused him to die. He has been raised from death to life. In his care, Jesus turns Naomi’s mourning into joy.

Her loss. His care. This is a simple story, isn’t it? But what is the heart of the story? Why does Luke preserve this story for us? Is it just about Jesus’ power to raise the dead? That is certainly important and amazing. The people see this, and they are filled with awe and praise God. But that is only part of the story, and that is only part of her story. After all, Jesus has not raised this young man to eternal life. Someday, he will die again - before or after his mother.

The heart of the story is Jesus’ heart of care for this woman. At the heart of his mission, is his heart for hurting people like this woman. When he sees her, he is moved by her suffering. He acts on her behalf, because his heart beats with compassion for her. He reveals more of himself and more of his glory, because of his heart of compassion for this woman.

I am reminded of General Dwight Eisenhower, who later become President. Almost fifty years ago now, on the 20th anniversary of the day known as D-Day, he went to Normandy and filmed a television special about the battle he led that day, which began the conquest of Europe during World War Two. As Eisenhower stood at Normandy, looking at both the waves of the English Channel and the waves of white crosses over American graves, he was asked to reflect. What was he thinking about? The tanks? The guns? The planes? The ships? The victory? “Instead,” wrote historian Stephen Ambrose, “he spoke of the families of the men buried in the American cemetery in Normandy. He said he could never come to this spot without thinking of how blessed he and (his wife) Mamie were to have grandchildren, and how much it saddened him to think of all the couples in America who had never had that blessing, because their only son was buried in France.”

By preserving this story, Luke reveals this quality in Jesus - a heart of compassion. As he sees this nameless woman in this little town, his heart goes out to her. He enters her story with his care - his heart, his hands, his hope, and his healing.

Yet that is not all, is it? This picture of Jesus in her story, reflects his redeeming grace in **OUR STORY**. After the second scene of the fall, our story is a story of our loss, and in the third scene of redemption, we discover his care for us.

Just as we entered her story with her loss, let’s enter our story with *OUR LOSS*. It is no accident that we are meeting this mother on Mother’s Day. This is the day when we celebrate and even romanticize motherhood. We are surrounded by images of loving mothers and loving children, rejoicing in the wonderful calling of motherhood.

This is a good part of our story. But this is not the full story of our story. Motherhood is a blessed calling, but the realities are much more complex than the dreamy images we enjoy on days like today. All around us and even among us, motherhood is a story of grief and loss.

All around us and even among us, women mourn children they have lost to death - whether that death came when the child was 25-years old, 25-weeks old, or 25 days old in the womb. They say a mourning mother never fully forgets what has been, and never really ceases wondering what might have been.

All around us and even among us, women mourn children who are still living, but whose lives have brought unspeakable grief to them. Maybe this is the grief of the mother whose son has wasted his life and his brain on drugs. Maybe this is the grief of the mother whose daughter has scorned her wisdom and given her body to sexual immorality. Maybe this is the grief of the mother whose child rejects the truths and wisdom of the Christian faith.

We have our saccharine images, but here is the reality: all around you and even among you, mothers wrestle with grief and loss - today and every day. Some are open about it, and some are silent about it. Some function well with it, and some do not. Some see a light at the end of the tunnel, and some see only darkness. This is the reality, ever since the second scene of the fall.

Of course, the grief of motherhood reflects the greater grief we all feel. In a fallen world, our relationships are often characterized by such loss. By God's mercy, it is not only grief and loss, but it is often grief and loss. Maybe we cry with Nicholas, "I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench." We cry this, and we wonder who will come and do this. Who will sit beside us in grief and loss?

The story of Naomi is the story of her loss and his care. Our story is the story of our loss - and it is also the story of *HIS CARE*. In response to the raising of this young man, the crowd proclaims a wonderful word: "God has come to help his people." They may not realize how true this is, for they have not seen all of Jesus' glory. But as we look back on this woman's story and bring it into our story, we realize that Jesus' heart is not just for this woman. It is for people of all kinds. He is the evidence of the truth of those words: "God has come to help his people."

We need to hear this. In Reformed theology, we rightly speak of the wrath of God with regard to sin. We create a false god when we ignore God's anger toward sin and justice against sin. But the same God who hates sin, so loved the world that he sent his Son to care for sinners. While we confess the wrath of God against who we are in our sin, we profess the compassion of God and his Son, which secures the redemption of such sinners. Let's use the same categories as before, and discover Jesus' care in our story.

We see his heart. Just as the Savior was moved by the suffering of this woman, he is moved by the suffering in our story. Right. Good. Check that off your list and move on. But wait - do you believe this? Have you experienced this? Do you believe in your heart and know in your life that Jesus Christ has a heart for you in your grief and loss?

You may struggle with this, because you may not see this as clearly or sense this as deeply as you want. You long for someone to sit beside you on the mourning bench, but you do not see Jesus there with your eyes, and you may not always sense him there with your heart. Is his heart for the woman, the same as his heart for me?

The answer to that desperate question is yes, because he is the Son of God, who is infinite, eternal and unchangeable. Jesus' character is consistent. If he cared for that woman on that sad day in the town of Nain, he cares for you today, in your season of grief and loss. No, you may not see him with your eyes, and you may weakly sense him in your spirit. Sometimes it is a step of faith to believe that Jesus does care, for part of the difficulty of grief is the loneliness of grief. You may seem to be the only one on the mourning bench. But with eyes of faith, you can see and sense that he is there, with a heart that is moved for you in your grief and loss.

Debbie is a woman who has known the struggle of longing for a child of her own, and never having one. She writes, "Nothing else in my life has been as baffling to me. My heart cries out, 'Why, O God, will you not answer my prayer?'...When this happens, God in His time and in His various graceful ways, comes to me to remind me that I am not alone...Is Jesus enough to make up this aching void in my soul? I do not always feel that it is so. But it is. Jesus loves me...this I know."

We see heart, and we see his hand. Just as the Savior suffered ceremonial uncleanness for this woman and her son, Jesus suffered personal destruction for us. The hand that touched the coffin, went to the cross and received the nails of the hatred of men and the wrath of God. On the cross, the One who could defeat death with a word, suffered death with barely a word, so that we could stand forgiven and righteous before our Father, now and forever. Jesus did not passively observe our suffering. He entered our world of suffering, and he suffered with us and for us, so that we might know him and his grace in a world of grief and loss.

The story is told of a man named Damien, who was from Belgium. He went to Hawaii long before Hawaii was a state - back in the 1870s. He went not to surf, but to serve the lepers, when few others would go

near them. He invited lepers into his home. He embraced lepers. He ministered to lepers as they died. But maybe most important of all, he referred to himself and the people he served as “We lepers.” He so identified with them, that he became one of them.

That is what Jesus has done. He has become one of us in living and in dying. He has extended his hand of care to us, and we see it most clearly as we see that hand nailed to the cross. With Jesus, it is not “Those who suffer grief and loss.” It is “We who suffer grief and loss.”

We see his heart. We see his hand. We see his hope and his healing. Not long before Jesus met Naomi, he spoke to the crowds who were following him. He said, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” He brings the hope of a healing day - a day of no more mourning, no more pain, no more grief, no more loss. He knows the scene of the fall is all too real to all of us, so he reminds us of the final scene - the scene of glory. On that day, weeping will turn to laughter. On that day, mourning will turn to joy. On that day, lingering sadness will turn to lasting happiness. You weep now, says Jesus, but with my rescue from sin and freedom to new life, I give you the hope of a healing day when your weeping will be gone.

Author Richard Winter writes of walking through mountain villages in Switzerland. If you are a farmer in Switzerland, what do you do with your cattle in the winter? You keep them in the basement - all winter long. But then spring comes, and the cows are released. Winter says they first run through the streets of the towns, but then they are on the way to “roam the mountainsides in warm sunlight.” Winter writes, “Imagine the joy, the exhilaration of being set free!”

Imagine the joy and the exhilaration of being set free from a world of grief and loss! Jesus does not just sit beside us on the mourning bench. Jesus promises a day when we will no longer need a mourning bench. Through his redeeming grace, he promises to raise the dead who are his own, and to bring them to a place of full joy and perfect freedom - the new heavens and new earth, where righteousness dwells, and where he dwells. That is the final and ultimate scene in the story of his compassion for us.

“I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.” Today, I hope and pray you will see and sense the compassion of our Redeemer. Only you know what puts you on the mourning bench this morning. Maybe you are a mother whose heart is filled with grief and loss. Maybe you have known other grief and loss. Maybe you are a young person, and you have done pretty well so far, but you know there are hard realities in this romanticized world.

May your heart see and sense his heart. As you go to your mourning bench, may you know that he is there with you. May you rejoice in the redemption that is yours by faith, and may that truth give you faith to see, and a heart to sense, the Savior who meets you on the mourning bench. And as he meets you there, may he remind you of the day when you will not need to meet him there anymore.