

## **“Jesus Models Compassion”**

Luke 7:11-17

In an article in *Campus Life* a number of years ago, a young nurse wrote of her pilgrimage in learning to be compassionate.

Eileen was one of her first patients, a person who was totally helpless. A cerebral aneurysm had left her with no conscious control over her body. A cerebral aneurysm is when you have broken blood vessels in the brain. As near as the doctors could tell Eileen was totally unconscious, unable to feel pain and unaware of anything going on around her. It was the job of the hospital staff to turn her every hour to prevent bedsores and to feed her twice a day. She had to be fed a thin mush-like substance through a stomach tube. Caring for her was a thankless task. “When it's this bad,” an older student nurse told her, “you have to detach yourself emotionally from the whole situation...” So, more and more Eileen came to be treated as a thing, a vegetable.

But this young student nurse decided that she could not treat Eileen like the others treated her. She talked to Eileen, sang to her, encouraged her, and sometimes she even brought her little gifts. One day when things were especially difficult and it would have been easy for the young nurse to take out her frustrations on the patient, she was especially kind. It was Thanksgiving Day and the nurse said to the patient, “I was in a cruddy mood this morning, Eileen, because it was supposed to be my day off. But now that I'm here, I'm glad. I wouldn't have wanted to miss seeing you on Thanksgiving. Do you know this is Thanksgiving?”

Just then the telephone rang, and as the nurse turned to answer it, she looked quickly back at Eileen. She said, suddenly, Eileen was looking at me... crying. Big damp circles stained her pillow, and she was shaking all over.

That was the only human emotion Eileen ever showed to any of the nurses, but it was enough to change the whole attitude of the hospital staff toward her. Not long afterward, Eileen died. The young student nurse closes her story, saying, “I keep thinking about her... It occurred to me that I owe her an awful lot. Except for Eileen, I might never have known what it's like to give myself to someone who can't give back.”

You know my friend, in reality, that's what Jesus did for us; He gave Himself completely for you and me and there's just no way we can ever pay Him back!

And that truth is revealed in our text for today also. Luke 7:11 to 17, records an incident from the life of Jesus that should speak powerfully to you and me. Listen now as I read that portion of the Holy Scripture, **Luke 7:11-17**.

In this text, Jesus made several conscious CHOICES that demonstrate genuine compassion. Using the choices He modeled we can learn to be compassionate too.

The First CHOICE is,

### **He Made His Presence Available**

In the verses just previous to our text, Jesus had responded to the great faith of the Gentile centurion, by healing the centurion's slave; and He did it from a distance. He never even made it to the centurion's house!

What do you think was the response of those who were with Jesus when this miracle took place? Well, you don't need to think too hard because the first verse of our text, verse 11, tells us that what Jesus did attracted a crowd. Whenever Jesus performed a miracle of some kind, the news of it immediately spread through the surrounding region. And that's not unusual. Don't you and I do the same thing today? When we see or hear of God's miraculous intervention in someone's life, don't we tell our friends? I sure hope so!

What I want you to notice is how Jesus handled this acclaim. As a result of this healing, I'm sure He was quite popular in Capernaum. So He could have reasoned, "Why don't I just set up headquarters here in Capernaum and let people come to me?" The people of the area tried to get Him to do that earlier, in Luke chapter four, after the deliverance of the demon-possessed man and the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. But Jesus refused by saying, "*I must preach the kingdom of God in other cities...*"

Now it would not have necessarily been wrong for Jesus to make Capernaum His headquarters. It was His divine prerogative. But if He had done that, we most likely wouldn't have the notable miracle recorded here in our text.

The fact that Jesus didn't set up headquarters in Capernaum and let the people come to Him tells us something. It tells us **Jesus made a conscious choice to make Himself available** to

the people right where they were. In making that choice He models for us the secret to effective compassion: we must go where the needs are.

So, according to our text, the next day after healing the centurion's slave, Jesus, His disciples, and a large crowd walked from Capernaum to Nain; a distance of about 20 to 25 miles. That was pretty much a day's journey so they most likely arrived at the town in the evening. Alfred Edersheim points out that, during this era in Jewish history, evening was the traditional time for burials.

Picture the scene in your mind, if you can. Jesus, the Prince of Life, and the crowd with Him are approaching Nain (which I understand would have been on a fairly steep incline), and they are met by a large funeral procession, a crowd of death, coming out of the city. This crowd is led by the weeping mother of the man on the funeral bier. The two crowds meet on the narrow road; which one will make way for the other? Which will prevail Life or Death?

In the custom of the time there was no misunderstanding, the crowd from Nazareth would give way and follow the funeral crowd to the final resting place of the deceased. By doing this they would show solidarity with the mourners and proper respect for the departed. And yet, though this was the established custom, it is not to be! What happens next shows us the second conscious choice Jesus made in modeling compassion for us.

The Second CHOICE is,

### **He Made His Person Touchable**

Here is a living demonstration of what the writer of Hebrews meant when he said that we have "...a High Priest who is able to be *touched* by the feelings of our infirmities..." Jesus allowed Himself to be touched by the sorrow of this widow and her friends.

Luke's record is written in a way to arouse sympathy in our hearts as well. First, the deceased is identified as the only son of his mother. As a son, and the only one, he was the family's hope for the future; for a continued presence in the village and for a greater posterity. He was the sole heir of the family property and bearer of the family name. But now, those hopes had been cruelly dashed by his untimely death.

To compound the loss, his mother was a widow. Having previously lost her husband, she had now lost her sole earthly means of support. She was most likely now doomed to a life of

grinding poverty. But beyond the loss of livelihood was the loss of relationship, of fellowship with her son. The heart of the Savior was deeply moved with compassion for this poor widow.

One thing that catches my attention in this account is how few words Jesus actually used - less than 10 words! I have learned and observed in my experience that presence is more appropriate than prose or platitudes in times of grief. Remember how Job's friends responded when they first came to him and saw his deep grief? For seven days and seven nights they sat with Job without saying a word. Incredible! Be careful what you say in this kind of setting.

Now, let's look at what Jesus said. The first two of those words are a command; "Stop weeping." I would have liked to hear the tones in which those words were spoken. I don't believe there was any hint of rebuke or irritation in them; only genuine empathy. In circumstances like this I wouldn't use those words myself, nor would I advise you to. But this is Jesus; He knows all things. Through her tears, this bereaved mother most likely didn't see Jesus, and even if she heard His compassionate command, it would have seemed preposterous.

Then, Jesus acts. He moves beyond the grieving mother to the litter that bears the body of her beloved son. And He does the unthinkable; He touches the litter with the dead man on it. Immediately, according to Jewish law, He became ceremonially unclean!

Jesus' action reminds me of a story told by Pastor Bill Sullivan, about Bernie. "Last week, Bernie came to the church door about five minutes before I was getting ready to leave for an appointment, and my first response to his arrival was, oh, no, not now.

Bernie had been drinking – I could smell it on his breath. He was sweating profusely and was a little bit shaky, but he spoke clearly. He asked if I could help him, and I asked what I could do for him. He said he was an alcoholic, and he needed a ride to Hillcrest Hospital, because he'd been part of a 12 step alcohol program, and had "fallen off the wagon."

I thought, OK, I can take him to the hospital on my way to my appointment. In my five-minute ride to the hospital, where I dropped him off at the emergency room, Bernie told me he really loved Jesus, but was having a hard time staying off the alcohol. I told him that admitting himself to this program at the hospital was a good step and that I was sure the Lord would help him. Bernie was clearly hurting physically, but seemed genuinely touched that I would help him in this small way.

When we got to the drop-off point in front of the ER, Bernie thanked me profusely for helping him. He reached over across the seat and wanted a hug. Bad smell, sweat and all, I hugged Bernie, and he hung on tightly for a moment as I assured him of God's love and care for Him. As he stumbled away from the van, he called back for me to pray for him, and I assured him I would. And I did, as I drove on to my appointment – I did pray that Bernie would find help and find compassion from the Lord.

And the Lord spoke to me clearly that, despite my initial attitude, all Bernie really needed was compassion. All he needed was to be treated with respect and dignity.”

Jesus heart was moved with compassion for this woman. He was touched by the sorrow of her heart and the severity of her need. He treated her with respect and dignity; his compassion moved beyond mere words; it moved Him to action.

The Final CHOICE is,

### **He Made His Power Applicable**

When Jesus touched the litter, the men who were carrying it stopped. Why? – I'm not sure. It seems likely that they would have heard of Jesus before this and may have expected Him to do something. But I doubt very much they expected Him to do what He did!

Seven words are all Jesus spoke, but they were infused with power and life. “Young man, I say to you, Arise.” And immediately the dead man sat up and began to talk. And Jesus presented him to his mother. The wording Luke used here in the end of verse 15 is reminiscent of II Kings chapter four where Elijah raised to life the son of the Shunemite woman. And the response of the people in verse 16 proves that they remembered the events of that time period. Incidentally, the area of Shunem was not far from Nain.

You see, Jesus didn't just have words of compassion for this grieving mother. He actually used the power at His disposal to make a difference. Now granted, you and I will never be able to do what Jesus did, but we can use the “power” God gives us, in the form of resources or abilities, to minister compassion to those in need.

Who of us wouldn't like to be able to do what Jesus did? To be able to raise someone from the dead, especially in the kind of circumstances related here in our text, would be an awesome experience. But what about following Jesus model of compassion in the small things

that no one else will notice – like Pastor Sullivan’s compassion on Bernie? If we want to be able to do big things for God, we must start by being faithful in the little things.

All of us know people like Bernie. We have people in our communities that everyone else looks down on for one reason or another. Are we willing to step forward and show God’s love and compassion to them? Are we willing to risk being “defiled” in the eyes of our peers in order to show compassion to the least of these? Or are we afraid of what others will say about us?

My friend, Jesus’ choices clearly model for us the way to demonstrate genuine compassion. First, we must make ourselves available; we must go where the needs are. We must be willing to leave our insular communities of faith and reach out into the hurting world of people all around us. I know that kind of compassion pushes me out of my comfort zone too. But it is the Jesus way!

Then, we must allow ourselves to be touchable. We must cultivate a spirit of compassion for the lost and the hurting. That takes time, something that is at a premium for most of us today. But if we’re too busy to respond to the needs God brings to us in the course of life, we’re just too busy! Jesus always had time for people. As His disciples we are called to follow His example.

And finally, Jesus made His power applicable to the situation. He was willing to take the resources at His disposal and use them to alleviate human suffering. Can you and I do any less with the resources He has entrusted to our stewardship?

I urge you my friend, make a conscious choice right now, to commit yourself to a life of genuine compassion in the model of Jesus.