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Sometimes I Forget I'm a Christian

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Luke 7:1-17

[Jesus Heals a Centurion's Servant]

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ² A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. ³ When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. ⁴ When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, ⁵ for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." ⁶ And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; ⁷ therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸ For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." ⁹ When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." ¹⁰ When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

[Jesus Raises the Widow's Son at Nain]

¹¹ Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. ¹² As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. ¹³ When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." ¹⁴ Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" ¹⁵ The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. ¹⁶ Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" ¹⁷ This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

Sometimes I forget I'm a Christian. I don't even realize I've forgotten until I see a miracle and it surprises me. First I think, "Wow! That's amazing!" Then I remember I'm a Christian and I think, "Wait, that's not amazing. That's totally normal." Or when I am going through something really hard or scary and at first I think, "I cannot believe this is happening to me." Then I remember I'm a Christian and I think, "Oh yeah, right, this is totally normal."

Because *miracles* and *suffering* – they are the warp and weft of Christian life, the very fabric of our lives and our life together. Do you ever forget? Do you know why you forget? Because I know exactly why I forget. I forget because I don't spend enough of my waking hours at prayer and in the Word. I forget, when the *message of my faith* is not the *overriding message informing my life*. When prayer and the Word are not the filter through which I experience this daily life, I am inevitably going to forget and fall back on the loudest, most repetitive message I do hear.

And what messages are those? That depends on where you live and what you listen to, what you read, what internal voices you dial up loudest. My go-to *non-Christian messages*, if I had to put words to them, are: *scarcity*, *security* and *liberty*. Some voices – voices I believe are diabolical in their effect – would have us believe resources are scarce and security is threatened; that certain, maybe drastic, measures are necessary to preserve both a decent standard of living and basic safety. Because I'm already chicken-hearted and selfish, these messages find traction in me fairly easily.

Other equally robust voices (I'll call them more liberal) preach that our *liberty* is at risk; that we possess certain rights that may soon be denied us; that duty and decency demand that we act now to claim our rights, to insist on our rights. Because my politics mostly bend that way, this message also finds easy traction in me. Unless I'm *prayed up*, as Carl's mama used to say, and studied up, and have clear in my mind the profound difference between the Christian gospel and the messaging of this world, I'll be as lost as a ball in high weeds.

All of which is a too-long way to explain why understanding Luke 7 rides on remembering what Jesus said in Luke 4, in his inaugural sermon at Nazareth. Remember me telling you, a few weeks ago, how the three speeches of Zechariah, Mary, and Jesus lay the foundation for Luke's writing in both the gospel and Acts? We pick them up and carry them along with us through the text like a map, marking where they show up again – like chapter 7: a Roman captain in need of a healing and a widow in Nain at the funeral of her son.

Any Jew watching and listening to Jesus in the moment, who was also read up on his or her Bible, would instantly have recognized the echo of Elisha in 2 Kings 5 and Elijah in 1 Kings 17, the same two references of Jesus' sermon in Luke 4 that nearly get him killed. Can you tell me either story?

Naaman was a general in the army of King Aram and he had a skin disease. A slave girl captured from Israel who worked for Naaman's wife told him, "*Hey, we have a prophet in Israel named Elisha who could heal you if you went and asked him.*" That Naaman took the advice of a foreign slave girl suggests to me that he was pretty desperate, so he went to King Aram and asked permission to go find this guy Elisha – which he got.

So he travelled to Elisha's house and knocked on the door, and one of Elisha's servants told Elisha, "*There's a foreigner here with a gross skin disease and he wants you to heal him.*" To which Elisha replied, "*I'm pretty busy but tell him to go dip himself in the river seven times and he'll be healed,*" – which offended Naaman, who thought the guy could

at least come out and take a look. But Elisha's servant said, *"Well, if he told you to do something hard you'd do it, so why don't we go do the river thing just in case."* So they did, and it worked, and Naaman went home healed.

In 1 Kings 17, Elijah was on the run from King Ahab and hiding at a place called Kerith Canyon where ravens would bring his breakfast and supper. There was a drought which dried up the creek he was drinking out of, so God told him to go to the house of a widow in a village called Zeraphath. Only, the drought had also caused a terrible famine (redundant maybe?) so the widow and her son had nearly starved to death. Elijah asked her to make him some food, and she practically laughed and said, *"I have enough flour, oil and strength to make two biscuits: one for me and one for my son. After that we die."*

Elijah told her to make three biscuits, which she did. After that, her flour barrel and her oil jar stayed full. She and her son grew strong again, until one day – out of the blue – her son died. At first she blamed Elijah, but the Bible says Elijah went into the room with the boy and laid on him, breathed on him and restored him to life, and then brought the boy and gave him back to his mother. And the mother knew then and there that Elijah was a holy man of God.

Two separate Old Testament prophetic events, woven together in the sermon of Jesus, acted out in the ministry of Jesus, woven back together in the gospel of Luke, so that we might pick them apart for the sake of discipleship thousands more years later. (Sigh.)

Why did the mere references to the stories almost get Jesus killed? – because of the suggestion that Israel was not as special to God as Israel needed to believe it was. Just the suggestion. *Of all the lepers in Israel, only Naaman the Syrian was healed. In the entire famine of Israel, Elijah was sent only to the widow at Zeraphath.* Now he's not saying. He's *doing* it! This captain in the Roman army who sends for Jesus to heal his dying slave. This widow of Nain, walking along behind her son's dead body. The God of Elijah and Elisha is living and breathing in their very midst. The Roman has better manners than Naaman. He doesn't even expect Jesus to come to his house. *"Say the word and it will be done"* is the message he has delivered to Jesus.

And it's Jesus' turn to be amazed. *"Never in all of Israel have I seen this sort of faith."* The kind of thing that would have gotten him killed, remember. I wonder if Jesus was thinking, *"Just once. Just once I'd like my followers to do that. To believe that I can do what I say I can do. Without arguing and questioning and driving me crazy."* Probably not, but I wonder. The captain knows something about authority that satisfies Jesus very deeply. I need to spend more time with that because I know it's important.

What I haven't missed, what the followers of Jesus in the story still haven't seen, is that in healing the captain's slave Jesus just did something that some people will not like at all. In his earliest ministry activity, he is building the case against himself. The people around him are so enthralled, they follow him 25 miles to Nain. Whom would you walk to Mooresville to hear speak again? Or skip work and drive two days – put down the rest of your life – to see what he (or she) was going to do next? This is the call of Christ, of course. To put down the rest of our lives, to go where Jesus goes. Jesus is

going to Nain. We don't know why. Only Luke even tells this tiny story. On the road into town, Jesus' entourage meets a funeral procession coming out of town. Seeing it's a widow whose only son has died, Jesus is filled with compassion.

What is compassion? The root of the Greek word has to do with *intestines, the gut, the things that cause the gut to be upset, to twist*. *Compassion* is not *pity*. Both are good words for good human impulses, just not the same.

When I was a kid, there were three of us close in age living in houses that were side-by-side – Steven, Annette, and Brian. Of course we played together all the time, even though Brian was a "terrorist." We found a box turtle. Brian thought it would be interesting to see inside a turtle's shell. Secretly I worried it would hurt the turtle. Steven agreed, "good idea." Steven and I were afraid of Brian. So they cracked it with a hammer and peeled the shell back. I cried, but my friend, Steven, instantly threw up. I think now, that I felt pity while Steven felt compassion.

Henri Nouwen has written about this a lot. Pity is what we feel for others who are hurting, while we stay in our same place to feel it. Pity drives us to help people who are less fortunate – thus the term "*less fortunate*." Pity isn't wrong or bad. But neither is it compassion. *Com – passion* is to suffer with. To be where the suffering person is. To give up the position or the power or the privilege that allows my heart to hurt but my life to stay the same. Nouwen called compassion *the way of downward mobility*. Pity is: hurting and helping from a distance. Not wrong, but not compassion.

In Jesus we see compassion, and how can we not? How can **HE** not see his own widowed mother there, following his own coffin just a few months hence, and not feel his own gut twist with the grief of it? A widow who lost her only son pretty much had her own death sentence too. The only person duty-bound to care for her was gone. Other people's pity was her only hope for survival. Jesus decided she'd have better than that. He touched the boy – who sat up and talked. Jesus gave him back to his mother.

The crowd loved it. Could see nothing but the beauty of it. "*A great prophet has risen up among us! God has looked favorably upon us once again!*"

The danger and the threat will escape them until later – when their religious leaders begin explaining it to them. They'll explain that God's goodness and God's grace are by necessity on reserve, that not everyone can be trusted with it equally and right away. "*For the purity of our faith and the safety of our people, certain rules must be followed,*" they will say. And it will sound so logical and almost true, so long as one forgets the gospel. So long as one forgets to pray. So long as one forgets the larger text of which this text is part.

The very text that Jesus held when he told his own people what he was about to do – after which he went and did it. In this case: *healing the sick and raising the dead and reminding God's people they were not forgotten*. Not then. Not now. Not ever.

Friends, we know our duty. Let us do it and we shall live.