

Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, June 5, 2016
Text: Psalm 146; Luke 7:11-17

The God of All Compassion



**First United
Methodist Church**

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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The very first funeral I had was that of a five-year old girl who died from pneumonia. It need not have happened, but it was a long holiday weekend, and as I learned later, the emergency response crews were understaffed, and they did not get to the home soon enough.

I was a seminarian serving an internship as the pastor of a nearby Methodist congregation, so I got a call to visit the mother and father, who had no connection with the church. Their family name was "Farthing," a name as if chosen by Charles Dickens since they were very poor, and their house was sparsely furnished. They still had a blanket on the couch where their daughter had lain.

I sat in the living room with them, and at first they were silent. Then, they began to rail against God. "What kind of God would take our daughter? You tell us, man of God! God is supposed to love us, to take care of us." And if they had known the passage we have just read from the Gospel of Luke, they could have added, "Jesus saved the son of that poor widow; why didn't he save our daughter? God is not fair!"

That is a human cry which all of these healing stories raise for us as we read a cycle of them from the gospel during these weeks after Pentecost. "If God could do that for the widow of Nain, for the centurion in Capernaum, and for Mary and Martha by raising their brother, Lazarus, why did not God do that for me?" That is a very faithful question to ask, and there is no glib answer, either sitting with the Farthings in their living room long ago or meeting together here today in this sanctuary.

Perhaps more to the purpose Luke has for sharing this incident with his readers, it is important to note that Jesus does not cure every ailment and resuscitate every dead person. He is not portrayed as a magician with a special technique. Rather, the key phrase in this gospel account is, "When (Jesus) saw her, he had compassion for her . . ." He had compassion for her because, as a widow, she had no means of support other than to be dependent on her only son, and now he, apparently, had died. The family, the clan, was the social security system of the day, and when that was gone, there were no other means of survival. That is why throughout the Bible the representatives of God's compassion always plead for the faithful to take care of the widows and the orphans.

What do you say to parents whose child has just died? I visited with the Farthings occasionally over the next few months. Their anger subsided, but I still was the representative of a harsh God, and I found nothing comforting to say.

Here is what not to say. There are some people who try to explain death and reveal God's purposes. Here is a book of model letters offered by the Rev. Thomas Cook, intended to give guidelines for corresponding with friends about love, marriage, friendship, religion, and death, The New Universal Letter Writer, published in 1807. A minister writes to his friend whose wife has just died in childbirth:

"My dear friend, I sincerely commiserate your variegated calamity, and wish there was anything in my power that could alleviate your distress." None of us could imagine writing, "I sincerely commiserate your variegated calamity." And then, this good pastor goes on to say that the "affliction," the death of his friend's wife, was a gift from God to "wean us from the world. When everything goes smoothly on and nothing interrupts the present enjoyments, we are apt to forget the God that made us." (p. 95, 96)

Rubbish! It is best to say nothing but rather to sit with the grieving person and feel deeply with them. "Compassion," to feel passionately with another.

We have a ministry of compassion here at First Church. I hope that is generally true for each one of us as we relate to others within the congregation. But I point specifically to the work that Jim Ostrander and a group do in keeping in touch with all of our housebound members and friends, and the cadre of hospital visitors, under the guidance of Doug Knudson, who keep track of us when we are in the hospital or rehab center. This is one of our strongest ministries, and it is remarkable in a regional congregation like ours. We live scattered across a several square-mile area, and there are so many hospital systems and rehabilitation centers that just keeping track of one another is a major job.

Not so in the dairy farming community of Apple River, Illinois, a population of 431, my first appointment in northern Illinois; it was easy to know what was going on in peoples' lives. One morning I walked to the post office to pick up our mail; everybody did that, there was no postal delivery. And Velma Gill, who was the telephone operator and knew absolutely everything about everybody, ("Sure, I'll ring Gordon's house, but he's not there; he's having coffee with Bob over at the drug store."), Velma saw me in the post office and said, "Good morning, preacher; how are you feeling?" I responded, "Fine, Velma; why do you ask?" "Well, I saw your bathroom light on at about 3 a.m. this morning and wondered if you were okay." Keeping track of each other in Apple River was not difficult, but it is hard work in

Madison. And, it is work we do not see day-to-day in the life of the church unless we are the one in the hospital or confined at home, and then it makes all of the difference in the world.

Some of you may remember that three months ago I slipped on ice in the driveway at home and fell hard on my left side. After lying there for a few moments to get my breath back, I got in the car and drove to church where I had two meetings that morning. The pain increased as the morning went on, and I should have been smart enough to go to the hospital when I put on my overcoat to go to lunch and screamed so loudly in pain that Seth Schroerlucke came running out of his office to see who had been attacked.

But always the “trooper for God,” I went off to lunch with Jim Hoyt, a member of the church, and tried making it through lunch at The Nitty Gritty. But, Jim could see that I was not doing well and, as one of the visitation team, he said, “Phil, I am not taking you back to church; I am taking you to the hospital emergency room.” That is compassion in action.

Jim sat with me in the waiting room, accompanied me to the examining room, amused himself by watching all of the procedures by which he now knows me inside out, listened to the diagnoses that I had broken three ribs and punctured a lung, and carried my belongings as I was wheeled to the Trauma Unit. Six hours, six hours of being with me, not necessarily feeling my pain, I would wish that on no one, but relieving my pain just by being there . . . the ministry of compassion, of God’s compassion. It is an essential part of this church’s ministry, and like most ministry, we do not see it unless we are the one in need of it.

Compassion is God’s love in action. Sometimes it is very personal, as I have just shared. Other times it is very public. When we discovered a family sleeping at the doorway of the church building last autumn, a family which included an infant, we looked for ways to augment the Salvation Army’s ministry with homeless families. We could not just sit still and feel sorry for them. We had to feel with them, which meant taking steps to meet a need, a crying need.

When we see people hungry every day, hungry for food, yes, but also hungry for being treated as human beings with names, and hungry for a community within which to interact, and even hungry for a gospel message that honors them, we organize to act. Every day there are people here helping people who come here, desperate to be taken seriously. On Sunday mornings, now that some homeless service options have been eliminated, we are finding a few people sleeping on the grassy strip between our sidewalk and Wisconsin Avenue. We could call the police since that, technically, is city property. Instead, at about 8 a.m. members of the church and our security person, Micah, go out and ask them to wake up and invite them to come in for a cup of coffee. It is so much more compassionate to invite people in than to shoo them away.

But our compassionate action does not end with a cup of coffee. If we truly care about others and strive to feel deeply along with them, then we are obligated by God to develop community-wide solutions. The church is not the answer to the problem of homelessness in Madison, or hunger, or depression, or alcohol abuse, or bullying, or joblessness, or loneliness, or disability. Compassion takes practical form in advocacy; compassion can be personal and public at the same time.

So, initiating conversations with the police department, coordinating efforts of not-for-profit groups, collaborating with other religious bodies, reaching out to pull the university in, prodding City Hall, monitoring the county, holding the legislature accountable for a vision of democracy that is based on “freedom for,” not “freedom from” . . . all are forms of compassion. A cherished colleague, Chris Gamwell, who is an ethicist at the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, outlined it simply for a do-good group of which I was a part called, “Protestants for the Common Good.” “We the people” can take our Constitution either to set us free *from* one another, free to say anything we want, free to do anything we want, free to protect our domestic castle with as many guns as we want, or it sets us free *for* one another, calling us into cooperation with one another, doing together and building together what none of us can do or build separately.

We see in Psalm 146 that God’s prejudice is that we are set free *for* one another, to feel deeply with one another. What are the actions of God’s compassion? To execute justice for the oppressed, to give food to the hungry, to set prisoners free, to open the eyes of the sightless, to lift up those bowed down, to love those who do what is right, to care for strangers (for immigrants), to provide for the orphan and the widow.

“And watch out,” the psalmist warns, “for leaders who make promises and any human beings who insist that they will make everything okay for everybody.” What a psalm to read in this election season! No, it is God’s compassion in

which we participate that will make life livable, that sets us free for one another. There is no political agenda espoused by anyone that displaces God's call for compassionate action. And there is no salvation in being set free from one another, sings the psalmist.

So, in Psalm 146 we have the compassion of the creator God "who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them." In Chapter 7 of Luke's gospel we have the compassion of redeemer Jesus Christ, who brings life to the widow by restoring life to her son. And then, in our life together as people of faith, we have evidence of the compassion of the Holy Spirit, human and not perfect, of course, but a passion experienced alongside one another that sustains us. The God of all compassion – creator, redeemer, sustainer, a trinitarian rendering of God's love for us in the midst of human life and death.

I read a statement of faith from a Confirmation class from another congregation than ours, a United Presbyterian church in St. Louis. Our grandson, Karl, was one of the authors. The first few lines caught my attention, not only for their imagination but also for the reference to God in third person plural.

"God is a poet, their Poems weave the base code of the Universe.

God is a painter, their Brush strokes filling in the holes left in space.

God is a musician, their Compositions giving us language and music of our own.

God is a sculptor, their Kiln firing the forms that roam Their Earth."

I asked Karl, "Why God as 'their' rather than 'his,' 'hers,' or 'its'?" And he responded that the group wanted to be sensitive about gender identity, and not assign to God male, female, or inanimate properties. "Their" is more inclusive. I accept that as a very sensitive approach, a sensitivity that apparently was not as evident at the United Methodist General Conference a few weeks ago. Maybe we have something to learn from 13-year old Presbyterians. I told him that I would share their intent with you. But I also added that for my sermonic purposes third person plural works because God's compassion takes many forms. The psalmist sees it in the God of creation, Luke sees it in the Jesus of the people, and we see it in one another as the spirit moves us. The God of all compassion . . . in three persons, available to all people.

The Farthings, the young couple whose five-year old daughter died from pneumonia, they had another child while I was serving the neighboring congregation. They asked if I would baptize her. I was conflicted. I had spent quite a bit of time with them in subsequent months, just sitting in their living room and listening, occasionally responding, but giving no answer to the question, "Why?" But, over the year of their mourning they had never come to worship at the church, and, after all, baptism is a sacrament anchored in belief; it is not just a social custom.

I responded, "Well, I am moving away in a few weeks and maybe there is not time to get everything ready." And Mrs. Farthing gazed past me and said, "My daughter died, and now one of my best friends is leaving." She was talking about me as one of her "best friends," and she was sincere. In those times I had sat with the Farthings, feeling deeply their pain and not being able to explain it away, they had felt something akin to God's presence, in spite of my shortcomings and misgivings.

We did the baptism on my last Sunday in that church. It was a sacrament of compassion, God's compassion. Amen.