

Compassion

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
February 5, 2017, Pastor Mary Koon
(Scripture taken from the NRSV)

Leviticus 19:33-34

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Our gospel story this morning comes from Luke, and it is only found there. It takes place after Jesus heals a Roman's soldier's slave, and marvels at the soldier's great faith. After healing the man, Jesus leads a crowd 25 miles southwest to the town of Nain – whose name means beautiful.

Luke 7:11-17

Soon afterwards Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. 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. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 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!" This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

Two large crowds meet at the gates of Nain -- Jesus and his followers, and a funeral procession, presumably in mourning, on its way out of the city to bury the only son of a widow.

Widows were some of the most vulnerable in Jesus' society, for without a man (a husband, father or son) to care for her, a widow is at the mercy of the kindness of strangers for the basics of survival – food, shelter, clothing. It is why throughout the Bible God tells God's people to care for widows and orphans -- they are emblematic of the most weak and in need of care.

Jesus sees the widow – and without the woman asking, professing her great faith, or the crowd stepping in on her behalf, he has compassion for her. He speaks words of solace, “Do not weep.” These kind words foreshadow the great work of restoration.

The Greek verb Luke uses here for “to have for compassion for” is *splanchnizomai* “splanx needs zo my.” It comes from the word, *splanxa*, which means liver, kidney, heart, bowels – the place thought to be the seat of emotions in the ancient world. (We say the same today, too, as in, “I just have a gut feeling about that!”) So when Jesus sees the widow, he is literally moved in his guts.

Two of the most well-known gospel stories in Luke employ this same word -- moved in the gut --for compassion. The Samaritan (hated, outsider) offers compassion to the hurt stranger on the road – bandaging him, carrying to safety, paying for a stay at an inn. And in the parable of the prodigal son, it is the father who shows compassion “splanx needs zo my” toward his child, and sets off running toward the one who returns. Compassion, by its nature, requires no solicitation - no critiquing, no questioning, no conditions.

Stories like we one we read today and the two parables just mentioned are all over Luke’s gospel, and that makes a lot of sense, because Luke knows that Jesus is bread for the world – the whole world. Luke’s gospel illustrates that Jesus came for all people and has a preferential option for the poor, the outcast, the disenfranchised, and those on the margins of society. Think about it -- Luke begins with an angel coming to a poor, young peasant to tell her that she would bear the child of God. And the angels proclaim the news of that birth first, not to the elite, the educated, the well-bred, but to the shepherds.

Compassion is the ability to place one’s self in another’s shoes; to feel “with” another human being, and not just “for” that person. It makes us vulnerable. Jesus is compassion personified – even unto the cross -- a reflection of the Holy One who seeks us, reaches out and transforms us. In our world today, compassion means letting our hearts be broken by the things that break the heart of God.

Jesus’s compassion toward the widow saves two lives. By reviving her son, his mother is saved from a desperate situation.

It was the act of compassion of Jesus toward the widow in our story that stopped me in my tracks this week as I read and heard about our country’s 90-day ban on immigration from the Muslim-majority countries of Iraq, Iran, Somalia, Sudan, Libya and Yemen, and indefinite prohibition of Syrian refugees, as well as the ban on all immigration for the next 120 days.

The UN says that the Syrian refugee crisis is the worst humanitarian crisis since WWII. I don't know how it feels to be a refugee, but I'm trying to learn.

The ban on immigration to our country was met with holy outrage -- fueled by compassion toward our fellow human beings. As of yesterday afternoon, a federal judge halted the enforcement of the ban. Homeland security has suspended actions relating to this order. The state department will comply with the judge's decision (James Robart) to suspend the enforcement of the order while a case brought by Minnesota and Washington heads to court. (npr.org, 2/4/2017)

Certainly, confusion abounds, and immigration is still precarious. Refugees from all over the world are suspended in temporary shelter, and the need for safety, security and medical interventions continues.

As people of faith, may we never forget that Jesus was a refugee, traveling from Bethlehem to Egypt in order to flee an oppressive and murderous government. Throughout scripture, people of faith are reminded that we are to love the alien residing in our land, because we, ourselves, were strangers in a strange land. When we show hospitality to the stranger, we entertain angels unaware. And what we do to the least of these, we do to Jesus.

Compassion for others is transformational. It changes us and it changes the world. Kindness is so needed today -- in our homes, our schools and in the public sphere. I am very concerned about the example we are setting for our children. But how can we grow more compassionate?

Continue to pray for how God might use us. Pray also that we might not succumb to fear or dismay, but approach the world with tenderness.

Remain open to the stories of people who are different from you and be willing to use your imagination to understand how other's feel.

I will conclude with the writing of Warsan Shire, a British-Somali poet who writes the poem, "Home." This poem has become a rally cry for refugees and their advocates:

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark

you only run for the border
when you see the whole city
running as well.

your neighbors running faster
than you, the boy you went to school with
who kissed you dizzy behind
the old tin factory is
holding a gun bigger than his body,
you only leave home
when home won't let you stay.

no one would leave home unless home
chased you, fire under feet,
hot blood in your belly.

it's not something you ever thought about
doing, and so when you did –
you carried the anthem under your breath,
waiting until the airport toilet
to tear up the passport and swallow,
each mouthful of paper making it clear that
you would not be going back.

you have to understand,
no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land.

who would choose to spend days
and nights in the stomach of a truck
unless the miles travelled
meant something more than journey.

no one would choose to crawl under fences,
be beaten until your shadow leaves you,
raped, then drowned, forced to the bottom of
the boat because you are darker, be sold,
starved, shot at the border like a sick animal,
be pitied, lose your name, lose your family,
make a refugee camp a home for a year or two or ten,
stripped and searched, find prison everywhere
and if you survive and you are greeted on the other side

with go home blacks, refugees
dirty immigrants, asylum seekers
sucking our country dry of milk,
dark, with their hands out
smell strange, savage –
look what they've done to their own countries,
what will they do to ours?

the dirty looks in the street
softer than a limb torn off,
the indignity of everyday life
more tender than fourteen men who
look like your father, between
your legs, insults easier to swallow
than rubble, than your child's body
in pieces – for now, forget about pride
your survival is more important.

i want to go home, but home is the mouth of a shark
home is the barrel of the gun
and no one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore
unless home tells you to
leave what you could not behind,
even if it was human.

no one leaves home until home
is a damp voice in your ear saying
leave, run now, I don't know what
I've become.

<https://qz.com/897871/warsan-shires-poem-captures-the-reality-of-life-for-refugees-no-one-leaves-home-unless-home-is-the-mouth-of-a-shark>