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6/5/16

Proper 5C  
1 Kings 17:8-24  
Psalm 146  
Galatians 1:11-24  
Luke 7:11-17

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.**

Okay, here's your biblical Greek vocab word for the week:

*splanchnizomai.*

This word, found three times in the Gospel of Luke, means **compassion**.

In today's Gospel reading, we are told that when Jesus saw the widow mourning the death of her only son "he had compassion for her." *Splanchnizomai* used in this way means an intense inner emotion and sympathy that accompanies mercy.<sup>1</sup>

It is used again when the Samaritan sees the stripped and beaten man on the road (Luke 10:33), and when the prodigal father sees his lost son for the first time far down the road (Luke 15:20).

In all three of these stories, this compassion is inextricably linked to action. More than simple, yet deep, emotion – because it is ultimately about mercy, it means the one who feels it must act.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Anderson Love, Theological Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3*.

In the story of the good Samaritan, he **takes** the injured man to an inn, bandages his wounds, and leaves money for the man's recovery. In the story of the prodigal father, he **runs** to his son when he recognizes him in the distance – thoughts of retribution left in his wake.

And in today's story, we hear Jesus **say**, "Do not weep," and **touch** the funeral bier.

*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.*

In all of these stories compassion led people to **act**, and in doing so they crossed lines of impurity and propriety. In a culture that operated on honor and shame, and on laws about protecting ritual purity – to cross these lines was a serious matter.

The injured man on the road had been passed by others not because they were bad or evil people, but because their compassion for him was not deep enough to move them to act in such a way that they put themselves at risk. The Samaritan had such *splanchnizomai*.

The father broke the bounds of cultural honor to welcome back a son who had brought shame to himself, and therefore his family – because his love and mercy outweighed everything else.

And Jesus approached a woman he did not know, which was improper, and touched the bier of a dead man, which made him ritually unclean – not because others begged him to, but because his heart was moved to ease her suffering.

Compassion of this sort leads people to cross lines. Because God's compassion, enacted in these stories, knows no bounds – and crosses right over the lines we create to divide ourselves into the worthy and the unworthy.

Time and again in the Bible we see God's compassion at work not only in the halls of power, but in the remote places, and with those on the margins on society.

This is what we find in the story of Elijah which we continue today.

Last week, if you remember, we heard the story of Elijah besting the prophets of Baal in a ritual sacrifice. Elijah continued to speak truth to power – in this case King Ahab – about the power of God and how we must be faithful to God and not also worship Baal. If he continued to do so, a drought and famine would strike the land.

As is often the case when hard truths are shared, the reaction wasn't positive. And so today we see God leading Elijah to relative safety in Sidon – a foreign land outside the immediate reach of the king – a land in which Baal was god.

There Elijah was directed that his saving grace would be at the hands of a widow, someone on the outskirts of society. And indeed this particular widow was – for when Elijah asked for food and drink she informed him that all she had fit in the palm of one hand and she was preparing to die, along with her son.

The power of God was with them, and Elijah informed her that the meager amount of meal and oil she possessed would feed all three of them until such time the drought ended and rain returned to the earth.

Even her son's death was not too much for the power of God, for when he became ill and died, Elijah's earnest prayer over his body brought him back to life.

Have you ever wondered why these stories we read were remembered and written down? What do they still say to us? Why do we still tell them?

Today, in particular, we tell this story because of the resonances it has with the Gospel reading from Luke – which is no coincidence as the author of that gospel drew from this story and intended hearers to make these connections.

In both, we have a prophet of God revealing God's compassion, mercy, and grace to widows – to those without power and hope of helping themselves. In both, sons are returned to life and given back to their mothers. In both, a gift is given.

That gift is hope.

Hope tells us that even in our darkest times, we are never alone – the love of God embraces us.

Elijah said to the widow *do not be afraid*, and Jesus said *do not weep*. Even in their desolation, God was with them – and God is with us too.

Hope tells us everything will be all right in the end – so if it's not all right, it is not yet the end.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sourced to both John Lennon and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*.

Yes, this is rather trite – because life is not always, or usually, wrapped up with neat little bows. But it is also right, because as resurrection people we know that no matter what happens in this life – including death – there is something more.

Theologian Frederick Buechner put it this way:

The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you. There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.

Reaching out to take the gift – and then, like Jesus, taking action to give it to others. This is our leap of hope – our call to *splanchnizomai*.

My prayer for this community here at St. James' is that we are a people who measure ourselves not by how full the parking lot is on a Sunday and our ASA – our average Sunday attendance – but that we are a community of compassion that works toward expanding instead the ways we are present and serve in the surrounding community and our AWI – our average weekly impact.

This is the difference between simply **going** to church and **being** the church.

We **are** the church when we **encounter Christ and engage the world**. Let this be our call as we discern the new directions of our faith community in the coming year.

~ AMEN ~