

East Hartford  
9<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost, Jubilee

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Psalm 146, Luke 7:1-17

## Outsiders

Today we heard two fascinating stories from Luke's Gospel. One was set in Capernaum, on the Sea of Galilee, 10-15 miles north of Nazareth, the other Nain, perhaps 10 miles south of Nazareth.

Capernaum was large enough that Roman soldiers were stationed there, and the centurion, the base commander, was a man with significant power and authority. His slave was seriously ill. We never learn his name, but he had heard about Jesus so he sent a delegation of Jewish leaders to seek Jesus' help. These leaders advocated and vouched for the Centurion. "Yes, he may be Roman, but he loves us, he even helped build our synagogue."

Jesus headed for the centurion's house, but before he arrived, other friends of the centurion stopped him with this message.

"No, no. Don't come all the way to the house. I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, I'm not even worthy to speak to you directly. Only say the word, and let my servant be healed." The centurion went on, "I know what authority can accomplish."

An aside: former Roman Catholics among us will recognize those sentences as ones that are included in the liturgy of the Mass.

Back on track: Jesus was completely amazed. "No one has shown such faith."

So this is a story about faith and trust, from someone who had power, real power, who was at least an outsider, who could have been considered an enemy. When the friends returned to the centurion's home, they found the slave in good health.

The second story is set just outside Nain a small village well to the south of Nazareth. As Jesus and followers were getting close to the town, a dead man was being carried out for burial. He was his widowed mother's one and only son. Most of us can only imagine her grief, parents who lose children, let alone an only child, never, ever "get over it." Additionally, he would have been her sole source of support - her social security - her only protection from total poverty.

The scripture says, Jesus "had compassion" for her. This word compassion is a wonderful word - the only phrase which comes to mind, is "gut wrenching". Jesus' had gut wrenching compassion for her. "Do not weep" he said to her. He touched the bier, "Get up." Jesus gave him to his mother.

So in our right hand so to speak, we have a story picture of faith, the faith of an "outsider." In our left hand, we have a story picture of utter compassion for one among the least of these, a nobody. Let me put the question which lies before us as starkly as I can. "So what?"

What difference is it supposed to make to us that an outsider/an enemy was a man of faith, and that Jesus had such compassion, that he helped a grieving widow? What difference did it make to those first readers of the gospel, 60 plus years after the resurrection?

It made a difference in the ministry of those first churches, and I believe it can make a difference in our ministry, we who all do the ministry of this First Church at the corner of Connecticut Boulevard and Main.

Paul, writer of letters, wrote these words maybe 20-30 years after the resurrection. *There is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female in Christ Jesus.* Paul proclaimed a gospel in which such human distinctions were erased by God's love.

20-30 years after Paul's death, Luke's Gospel with stories about Jesus' ministry with outsiders and nobodies was written. Acts was

written with stories about Peter's and Paul's ministries with outsiders and nobodies. The church then, the church today, shares a common struggle; to help people overcome that death dealing tendency of making distinctions between people and peoples, assigning merit and worth to some and denigrating others.

It is a human trait that we tend to codify by tradition, law, and policy. It begins within each of us individually. A song from South Pacific speaks this deeply human truth.

*You've Got To Be Carefully Taught*  
*You've got to be taught /To hate and fear,*  
*You've got to be taught /From year to year,*  
*It's got to be drummed /In your dear little ear*  
*You've got to be carefully taught.*

*You've got to be taught to be afraid*  
*Of people whose eyes are oddly made,*  
*And people whose skin is a diff'rent shade,*  
*You've got to be carefully taught.*

*You've got to be taught before it's too late,*  
*Before you are six or seven or eight,*  
*To hate all the people your relatives hate,*  
*You've got to be carefully taught!*

*Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein*

We know that hatred and fear lead to violence, we know the intent of violence is death. We know that the realities of poverty, world hunger and starvation are nothing less than thinly disguised murder in slow motion. Hatred and fear beget violence and death.

Love and compassion beget kindness, gentleness, trust, generosity and life. Love is better way, a life giving way of hope. Love is commanded by the Big Two, "Love God. Love one another.", expanded in the Big Ten, explicated in the Law of Moses, embodied in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, commended to and demanded of every generation of

the church.

*John 13:34-35 (NRSV)*

*34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*

*35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

*John 15:12 (NRSV)*

*12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*

Friends, none of us in this room right now, are 6 or 7 or 8, but because we live and breathe, all of us are young enough to be adult learners, continuing education students of the way and the ways of love.

Let me play out this metaphor of education and students and learning a little bit. I want to suggest that it was and is as we do our homework that the real learning happens. So I want to assign some homework for this upcoming week.

There are two times and places where I am never my best self. One is when I am on the phone on hold with some giant force - an insurance company, medicare, ATT. The other is when I am stuck in some check out line somewhere - Ocean State, Stop and Shop, etc. What are the places where you are less than your best - inclined toward impatience, perhaps downright cranky?

There is always someone else there - the one who is the phone with me, or the clerk at the check out counter. Here is my homework assignment in two parts. Part 1. To be so kind, and so good humored that I can hear the other person, on the end of the phone, or see the one at the cash register smile. You really can hear people on the phone smile you know. So Part 1, is to be so loving as to evoke a smile in return.

Part 2 of the assignment is to pray God's blessing on that other person.

This the homework I will undertake this week. Will you join me in it? Will you be so loving on the phone or in the checkout line so as to evoke a smile and will you pray God's blessing on that person?

We have been carefully taught - and we can even more carefully learn the ways of love which are the foundation for the ministries of our lives, as individuals and as this church.