



'Conversations with a Savior: *The Widow*'

Lectionary 10 – Third Sunday after Pentecost

5:30 pm, June 4, 2016

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[1 Kings 17:17-24](#); [Luke 7:11-17](#)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

As she stood at the coffee shop counter and ordered her latte, I noticed her feet were muddy. Not that they were the kind of muddy where you could wash the gunk off in the shower and down the drain. No, her feet were stained with what looked at first like mud. I did a double-take, and then a third take to see if perhaps they were stained purple, and I could then assume she had most recently been stomping grapes in some French vineyard.

But, no, the stain was a definite reddish-brown on her pale skin.

I was curious about where she had been, but didn't have the courage or chutzpah to ask this complete stranger. My coffee-mate, sitting beside me, had no such timidity. Somehow she sidled up to the counter, struck up a conversation, and ascertained why the young woman's feet were stained so. We ended up having a wonderful conversation with this delightful college student.

Her feet were stained because she had spent a few weeks on a mission trip to a refugee camp for Western Saharans in Algeria. Turns out she was a nursing student at Messiah College, as well as an athlete on their soccer team. Fresh back from her time in Algeria, she was filled with conversation about the abject poverty and the nursing skills she acquired in rudimentary conditions, the children she adored and the soccer matches she played with them, the hope she had to one day return and her dream to help bring clean water to the region.

Her feet were stained not from mud (though that is exactly how it looked to me), but from henna. Generations of women in the Muslim world have used a paste made of ground henna leaves to cover their hands and feet with beautiful designs. This Christian woman on a mission trip embraced that tradition as a way of truly being with the people she met, deeply entering their world. Such was the consequence of her faith, of her following her Lord Jesus.

For if there's one thing we consistently read about Jesus in Luke's Gospel in story after story, it is that Jesus enters deeply into the messy lives of the people he meets. He does not avoid such encounters. He has **compassion for them**. This reading today is a shining example, and sets the tone for chapters come in Luke.

Jesus, his disciples, and a number of other folks who have been following him from town to town, are about to enter a town called Nain. At the same moment, a funeral

procession is heading out of town. The body of a young man is being carried out on a funeral bier, and a large crowd of mourners, including the man's widowed mother, is processing out of the city gates for his burial.

You can just imagine the bottleneck. I suppose Jesus and those around him could have simply stepped aside to let the funeral procession pass by and go on its way. After all, Jesus did not know the deceased nor his grieving mother. What was Jesus to do about a dead man anyway? The crowds are following Jesus because he has been healing the sick, teaching, and preaching. They are expecting much the same in every town he enters. In a sense, there is an agenda already in place for Jesus, and the funeral procession is, literally, a roadblock and obstacle to that agenda.

But original agenda is superseded by that compassion I mentioned earlier. Luke says that when Jesus saw the son's mother, "he had compassion for her." Please understand this is a very particular word being used here. We typically think of compassion as a feeling of sympathy for someone who is suffering. But the Greek word Luke uses here as "compassion" (*splagchnizomai*) means more literally "stomach-churning" or "moved within one's inward parts." It gives the sense of some intense inner emotion that totally blows us apart, a visceral reaction to someone else's pain. Not just the lump in the throat or the tear in the eye, but a pain in our gut. That's what's happening here with Jesus. Jesus keenly feels the suffering of this woman who is already widowed, and now has lost her only son. In that culture, she is left pretty much destitute—in a patriarchal society, widows had to rely on their adult sons to care for them. She was in grief **and** in dire straits.

What happened next was Jesus entering deeply into her life and "getting his feet muddy," so to speak. Jesus does not step aside to allow the funeral procession to pass. Instead, he interrupts the procession. He interrupts death and burial and grief. He interrupts his original agenda. He has a conversation with the widow which is extraordinarily brief and definitely one-sided. Jesus in his compassion for her tells her "Do not weep." And then he reaches out his hand to touch the bier upon which the dead son has been placed. To do that is to enter deeply into the raw pain of this moment. To do that is also scandalous. Jesus, a faithful Jew, wasn't supposed to touch a corpse or that object upon which a corpse rested. If he did so, he would be considered "ritually unclean" by Jewish purity laws, and then forbidden from entering a synagogue or temple to worship until pronounced clean once more by a priest. Jesus was defying religious regulations, muddying his feet, making himself "unclean" by others' standards. Out of compassion.

Perhaps what happens next is considered the miracle here—that Jesus commands the young man to rise, and the son does just that and begins to speak. Jesus makes him live again and gives him back to his mother. Or is the real miracle this? That Jesus "muddied his feet." That his incredible compassion brought him into the life of that grieving mother, and in her encounter with him, she found her life changed forever.

And of course, all of this is a foreshadowing of Jesus' own death and burial and resurrection—an act where God's compassion for all humanity brings him to the cross, muddying his feet, giving his life.

Did you catch the end of our reading? How the crowds who followed him and the crowds who had been in the funeral procession, now praised God and said to one

another, "God has looked favorably on his people!" That is a truth that runs to eternity—God, through Jesus, looks favorably, compassionately, lovingly upon us. And then shows us how to do the same for others.

Today you affirm your baptism—in a sense this is your public acknowledgement of how God has looked favorably upon you out of compassion and love for you. This God made you his child in most cases when you were but an infant, and today you begin to take on the promises your parents made at your baptism so long ago. Promises to follow Jesus. This past year in Affirmation of Baptism class has not been about the pastors and mentors teaching you about God. This past year has been a time where we hope you've understood that together we are **encountering** God. Because God has chosen to enter deeply into our lives, just like Jesus did for that widow in Nain. In that encounter with us, God offers the gift of his powerful Holy Spirit, and it changes you and me, it inspires you and me, to follow Jesus more faithfully.

Where will you go in your following of Jesus? How might you "muddy your feet"? Who knows? I suppose that young woman in the coffee shop with the henna-stained feet and hands, when she was your age, still had little idea just where following Jesus would take her. But, as you enter deeply into this world of ours, with all its pain and heartache, remember that you are bearing Jesus' compassion and love to those around you. And such gifts you bear can bring healing, offer peace, radiate joy, establish justice, build friendships, and change lives. God has a wonderful purpose for each of you, has set you apart to do good, and is calling you to minister life in his name. **AMEN.**

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