

“Bearers of New Life”

Luke 7.11-17

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 10 June 2007

This story is about bringing the dead back to life. But, when you begin to dig into the story, it's about much more than that. We have a widow and an only son. If the son dies, the widow cannot inherit, and so becomes destitute, relying on charity for survival. (Repeatedly in the Old Testament, we hear the injunction to care for widows and orphans, and there was a reason!) The widow is totally dependent on her son for survival. So, there is an economic dimension to this story.

Do you remember Jesus' reaction when he saw what was going on? “When the Lord saw her, he had **compassion** for her.” The compassion was not simply feeling sorry that her son had died, but understanding the *reality* of what this woman would be faced with. The Greek word used here for compassion (*esplagchnisthe*) is not “mercy” or “sympathy” or “pity.” The root of the Greek word is *splagchnon*, which means bowel or gut; this kind of compassion that Jesus senses is a wrenching sensation in your gut. So, this is a story about deep compassion.

Something most of us wouldn't pick up on is that Jesus did something unthinkable for an observant first-century Jew. Jesus “came forward and touched the bier and the bearers stood still.” Jesus defiled himself – made himself ritually impure – by touching the stand on which the corpse of the widow's son was laying. You might not think this is a big deal, but in Jesus' society, purity had religious, political, and economic consequences. It also exemplifies that Jesus did not see the purity laws in black-and-white terms – healing on the Sabbath, touching the dead, associating with sinners, prostitutes, and tax collectors. The Sabbath was created for humanity and not the reverse. This story is about seeing the different shades and hues that exist on the spectrum. It is not about inviolable theological absolutes, but about doing what is demanded by compassion.

So, what is this story about? Raising the young man from the dead, to be sure, but it's also about economic justice, the overturning the value system of purity with God's value system of compassion. “In the message and activity of Jesus,” writes Marcus Borg, “we see an alternative social vision: a community shaped not by the ethos and politics of purity, but by the ethos and politics of compassion.”¹ And to you who connected with this congregation by covenant this morning, you should know that we at Plymouth try – imperfectly – but we try to be guided by the ethos and politics of compassion.



As I was sitting at breakfast on Wednesday, reading the *Christian Science Monitor*, one of the few American newspapers where you can read about international affairs, I was struck by a theme and counter-theme in the paper that were tied together by a synchronicity of anniversaries.

One of the stories on the cover of the *Monitor* that morning was a great story by Irene Prusher about the lives of two very different – but in some ways similar – men living in the occupied West Bank near Shiloh (which was the first capital of the Israelites after the Exodus). It has been 40 years since the Six-Day War of 1967, when the Israeli Army effectively crushed the air forces of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq in one day and then claimed land as its own: Jerusalem, the West Bank of the Jordan, the Sinai peninsula, and the Golan Heights.

¹ Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. (SF: HaperSanFrancisco, 1994), p. 53

This story gave the perspectives of Fathi Shebaneh, a Palestinian farmer who risks his life to reach his olive trees, which are perilously close to an Israeli settlement. He says, “I go even though it’s dangerous for me. But my land is more important than my life.” How many of us feel so strongly about our homes in Fort Collins or Loveland or Windsor?

And it gave the perspective of Yisrael Medad, a Jewish settler who was born in New York. He moved to Israel decades ago, fought in the Six-Day War, and said “there should be no establishment of a Palestinian state because Israel wouldn’t survive it.” To Mr. Medad, it’s either Israel or it’s Palestine...it’s not both Israel and Palestine.

These two men do not see the situation in anything but black-and-white. Without compromise, seeing the gray area between their positions, there will be no progress. Neither is willing to *feel compassion* nor to *defile themselves* by altering their doctrinaire stance. And until someone makes the move, there will be no end to violence.

Thankfully, the other story is more hopeful. Last week was the sixtieth anniversary of the Marshall Plan, the United States’ incredibly successful recovery plan for Europe that had been devastated by the Second World War. The U.S. spent \$13 billion in aid to help war-ravaged countries. Historian David Reynolds wrote, “Marshall aid was about hearts and minds, not just about mouths and bellies.” I am not naïve in thinking that the aims of the Marshall Plan or the rebuilding of Japan following World War II were purely altruistic, but the American populace did have a sense of compassion for those nations and was willing to fund an incredibly comprehensive aid arrangement.

If you look at current nations who comprise the G8, you will see how successful the Marshall Plan was in getting economies back on their feet. Russia and Canada were the only G8 nations who did not benefit from Marshall Plan aid or reconstruction aid for Japan following the war. From that perspective, it was an incredible success.

You may remember that at the G8 Summit two years ago in Gleneagles, Scotland, the leaders of the industrialized world pledged to help Africa with unprecedented development aid that would make significant strides to combat AIDS. Unfortunately, the only nation to meet its full commitment to is Canada. *There is room for compassion in our politics.*

I am also mindful of what our teens have been doing on their mission trip along the Mexican border this past week. And that the Senate on Thursday night balked on an immigration bill that would create a guest-worker program for Mexican citizens. We need look no further than the border to understand the economic realities faced by our brothers and sisters. *Do we feel compassion? Can we look beyond the black-and-white?*



We need a foreign policy that looks at the economic realities not just of our own nation, but of God’s whole world. We need to be especially attuned to the economic needs of those who are most vulnerable: in the developing world and in nations destroyed by war.

We need a foreign policy grounded in compassion, seeing other nations as partners on God’s earth. We need to be willing to act on our ethics. Whatever we sow – whether it is economic aid to help others develop or economic exploitation that makes the rich richer – so shall we reap.

We need a foreign policy that see all the shades, hues, and colors: not just black and white. Monochromatic thinking has cost the lives of tens of thousands in Iraq, and it isn’t doing much for the situation in Israel.

We need – the entire world needs – America at its best. And we have done a lot of things right, whether its universal free education, creation of land-grant colleges, or the Marshall Plan. When the war in Iraq ends our mission there will not be accomplished...it

will only be beginning there, if we are wise enough to engage it. Some of you may want all the troops home tomorrow, but we made this incredible nightmare for the people of Iraq and the region, and now we need to help clean it up.

We need a Marshall Plan for Iraq, if we are to see a hopeful future in the Middle East. Some will say we can't afford it...that we've dumped enough money into Iraq. But, I would counter that we can't afford NOT to rebuild and revitalize Iraq. *We need to help bring Iraq back from the dead.* It's a matter of economic justice. It's a matter of compassion. It's a matter of seeing beyond the black-and-white.

We need to take risks, as Jesus did, to raise the dead.
Amen.