

“Compassion Takes Guts”

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June 25, 2023

¹¹Soon afterwards [Jesus] went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. ¹²As 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. ¹³When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." ¹⁴Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" ¹⁵The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. ¹⁶Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" ¹⁷This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country." (Luke 7:11-17)

When I think about the times in the Bible when Jesus healed someone, most of the time – in fact, almost all of the time – someone asks him for help. Interestingly, that does not happen here. No one comes up to ask him to heal their affliction or that of a loved one. In fact, my guess is that this grieving mother didn't even know that Jesus was there. He is a bystander – someone who just happened to be near the city gate when this funeral procession comes out on its way to the burial ground. No, something else motivates Jesus to act in this story.

The English translation puts it this way: when the Lord saw a grieving mother crying over the body of her dead son, Jesus “had compassion for her.” In that moment, something stirred within the heart of Jesus. We might call it sympathy. We might call it pity. Our Bible calls it compassion, and that is a good word for it – it is a good way to say that Jesus was moved deeply by the suffering and misfortunate of this poor woman.

But I would say that the original word – the Greek word – is even better. The ancient verb *splanx-nizomai* literally means, “to be moved in the inward parts.” And by inward parts, it is not just speaking of inner thoughts or private emotions. The word comes from the noun *splanxna*, which means human entrails -- the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys.¹ Or, as I would put it, the guts. At the time this gospel was written, the core of the body was considered to be the center of human affections – the place where we as human beings felt our deepest emotions.

This is a critical distinction, because I am not sure we think this way when we use the word “compassion.” To feel true compassion is not just to think, “Aww, that’s sad.” True compassion is a gut-wrenching feeling... a knot in the stomach... a weight on our chest... a physical pull on our heartstrings.² To feel compassion is to feel another person's situation -

¹ <https://biblehub.com/greek/4697.htm>

² "A Rising in Nain" Lauren J. McFeaters, <https://www.goodpreacher.com>, on June 4, 2013.



- another person's pain, grief, or tragedy -- right here -- in our heart, in our innards, in our *guts*.³

Many of us may have felt this kind of compassion this past week as we followed the story of the Titan sub that went missing over the wreckage of the Titanic. I admit I felt it in my gut, imagining what those five people must have been feeling and experiencing down there in the darkness of the deep, trapped in an iron coffin, knowing that the chances for rescue were close to zero. But on Thursday President Obama wisely noted the tragic disparity between the worldwide interest we were giving to five thrill-seeking billionaires, while as many as 600 men, women, and children from Syria, Egypt, and Palestine had perished off the coast of Greece just days before with hardly any notice whatsoever. The 700 or so people on board were asylum-seekers who were so desperate for a better life that they were willing to load their families onto a dangerously overcrowded fishing trawler. It was the only chance they saw to evade war, oppression, and poverty. And their deaths had elicited, at best, an “Aww, that’s sad” from the world. Many of us didn’t even know it had happened.

Why? Why didn’t we feel the maritime tragedy that unfolded off of the coast of Greece in our guts in the same way? The basic math suggests that this was a loss 140 times as great as the one we obsessed over this past week. And I don’t want to minimize the Titan tragedy, but now seems likely that those five passengers never knew that anything at all was wrong – that a high-pressure catastrophic implosion at that depth would have killed them instantly.⁴ Meanwhile, the refugees who went into the sea off the coast of Greece would have experienced something very similar to the original victims of the Titanic – the panic of knowing the ship was listing... the terror of being pulled into the ocean... the heartbreak of watching family members die. Why didn’t we feel this in our guts with even greater intensity?

Yes, I know we could blame the media. Yes, they do choose what we see, what we hear, what we know. Perhaps, if we are honest, they even get to choose a lot of what we feel. But that’s kind of cop-out, isn’t it? The media give us certain types of stories because they know we are interested in certain types of stories. They know what drives sales, and clicks, and ad revenue. And my guess is that they know that we as a people have become kind of numb to certain kinds of stories. We have allowed ourselves to become numb to the kinds of things that should be breaking our hearts... awful things like children dying in school shootings... our planet slowly baking and suffocating as the climate crisis continues to deepen... families around the world suffering under oppressive regimes and economies to such an extent that the only chance they see is to take crazy chances to find a better life. The truth is that we are allowing ourselves to be numb to these things. The truth is that we are not feeling these pains the way we should be feeling them. These kinds of tragedies should be making us sick with regret and sorrow, because they are gut-wrenchingly awful things, and these gut-wrenchingly awful things are still breaking the heart of God. As people who say we follow that God, our hearts should be breaking, too.

And we shouldn’t just be feeling it in our gut. That is just where it begins. That feeling in the gut should motivate us to do something... to act... to put right what we know to be wrong. That’s the difference between genuine compassion and the saccharine

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press (1978), p. 86.

⁴ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/titanic-sub-search-catastrophic-implosion-rcna90744>

sentimentalism that lets us say “Aww, isn’t that sad” and then go right on with our business. If you don’t get the difference, then I recommend that you take some time to watch “A Small Light,” a series produced by National Geographic which is currently streaming on Disney Plus. It tells the familiar story of Anne Frank, the Jewish teenager whose tragic experience of Nazi atrocities became famous through her diary, from the perspective of some brave Gentiles who dared to help the Frank family. The central character is Miep Gies, a secretary in Otto Frank’s business, who risked her own life on a daily, even hourly basis to hide and protect those who had been marked for death by a Godless and evil system. Miep was so moved by the cruelty she saw – she felt it so deeply in her body and spirit – that she had no choice but to invest herself fully into a personal quest to save as many people as she could.

This, I would say, is the essence not only of true compassion, but true religion. The nineteenth century Reformed theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher was never satisfied with traditional understandings of faith. He was convinced that true religion had to be more than thought, belief, or conviction. He knew plenty of people who were well-versed in doctrine, who could quote the Bible word for word, who knew the right things to say at the right times, but they didn’t seem to feel or exude the faith, hope, and love of Christ. He arrived at the conclusion that faith isn’t really about what we know or think. True faith, he said, was something we feel in our bones. Emotion was not the right word, because it was more visceral and embodied than that. What he actually wrote was that “the essence” of religion is “the feeling of an absolute dependence” on God. I think what he meant by that is this: that what we strive for as faithful people is to be able to feel, deep down in our guts, not only that God exists, but that we are deeply connected to God in every aspect of who we are. And that is not something that we can grasp only through thought – it is something that we have to feel.

Many of you probably remember Andrew Young, the mayor of Atlanta who went on to be the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations here in New York. A man of deep and enduring faith, Young had been a member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference during the Civil Rights movement and later became the President of the National Council of Churches. He was raised a faithful Christian, and he raised his children to be faithful Christians. But he says he never really knew what that meant until his youngest daughter turned 20. It was right about that time that she came to her parents and told them that she wanted to go to Uganda to work for Habitat for Humanity. It caught Young completely off-guard, probably because he knew too much. As a U.N. official, he knew plenty about that part of Africa – that the government was completely unstable... that the nation was ruled by a ruthless dictator... that it Uganda was a place of violence and danger. He and his wife pushed back hard, challenging their daughter about the situation she would be going into. She knew all of it, but she was undeterred. Her heart was completely on the people in that place who desperately needed help. She could not explain it; she just felt it in her gut that she had to go. “Daddy,” she finally said, “it is something that Jesus has laid upon my heart.”

Andrew Young knew that he could not stand in the way of that kind of compassion and conviction. He wrote later about the feelings he had in his own gut as he watched his daughter’s plane take off for Uganda – feelings of pride and gratitude, but also deep fear and concern. It was also the moment when he had a life-changing epiphany. “I had always

wanted her to be a respectable Christian,” he wrote. “But it had never occurred to me that she would be a real one.”⁵

At the gate to the city of Nain, scripture tells us that Jesus brought a man back from the dead. A miraculous story indeed. But it is founded upon another miracle that may, if we are not careful, be buried under the drifting sands of language, time, and distance – the miracle that the living God not only feels our pain in his most inward parts, but is also moved by that feeling to ease our suffering and restore us to health. May God restore in us the capacity for this kind of genuine, responsive compassion, that we may do likewise. ***Amen.***

⁵ Website of Saint Andrews United Church, <http://www.sainta.ca/content.cfm?id=2109>