

“Being Conduits of God’s healing Love”
Valley Presbyterian Church – February 7, 2021
5th Sunday of Epiphany
Rev. Susanna M. Kawolics
Luke 7:1-17

Since Advent, the Narrative lectionary passages from the gospel of Luke that you’ve been hearing have been telling the story of Jesus’s life – from the angel’s announcement of his coming, to his birth, his baptism, his call to ministry. You have heard stories about his miracles, his teachings, and his call of the disciples.

One of the story-telling techniques seen throughout Luke’s gospel is that of presenting contrasting stories side by side or within each other. For example, in the months before Jesus’ birth, we have the story of a young virgin set in contrast to that of an old barren woman, both of whom miraculously become pregnant, Mary with Jesus, and her cousin Elizabeth with John the Baptist. When Jesus is born, we hear about both lowly shepherds and holy angels heralding his birth. As he begins his ministry, we read about fishermen catching nothing after being out all night, and then, at Jesus’ bidding, catching an abundance of fish in the morning. Last week, Rev. John preached about Jesus honoring the Sabbath as sacred, rest time, but also breaking Sabbath law in order to work for good on that day. In his sermon on the plain, which is told in the gospel just before today’s reading, Jesus offers a series of blessings immediately followed by a series of woes.

Today we reflect on two miracle stories, which also have some contrasting characteristics. Examining these differences will help us to see a depth and breadth to Jesus’ love and healing that might otherwise escape us.

The first story involves a Centurion, a male Gentile who is an authority figure in the Roman government. Although this military official is said to be a friend of the Jews, he did, after all, allow them to build a temple, he is at the same time, a part of the Roman power structure, under which the Jewish people are subjected and oppressed. Romans and Gentiles of this time were considered to be enemies of the Jewish people, of people like Jesus.

In contrast, following right on the heels of the Roman official’s story comes a very different one. This time, it concerns a widow who has just lost her son. Right after Jesus’s followers have taken in the miraculous healing of the Centurion’s slave, in their travels with Jesus they encounter a funeral procession. So here we have this contrast of an exuberant, amazed, joyful crowd led by Jesus crossing paths with a group of devastated, despairing, despondent mourners. The woman at the center of this crowd has no authority, no power. She is husbandless, and now childless as well, and has been left economically destitute. The laws of society at that time would have made her totally dependent on the generosity of others to live—having no husband or child who could take care of her anymore.

Luke pairs these stories. On the one hand we have a person of high authority, of means, considered an enemy of the Jewish people, who knows about Jesus and comes to ask for the healing of his slave. On the other hand, we have a widowed mother who has no authority, no means, who may not even have ever heard of Jesus, and who has not asked him for anything. I think these disparate characteristics of the people Jesus is compassionate towards teaches us a lot about the breadth and depth of his ministry.

We see that for Jesus, there is no “us” and “them.” He does not make distinctions about people worthy of receiving God’s grace – Male / female, rich / poor, powerful / powerless,

knowing him / not knowing him, actively asking / passively accepting. For him there is also no distinction between “enemy” or “friend.” In fact, just before these miracles, Jesus had preached his sermon on the plain in which he said (Luke 6: 27 on), “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. . . . Do to others as you would have them do to you.” He makes it clear through his preaching and his actions, through his words and deeds, that no one is outside the realm of those who are beloved children of God. And so, in turn, we who are followers of this radically inclusive healer and grace-giver are called to the same all-encompassing, sweeping, non-exclusionary love.

This week I was inspired by a speaker I heard online – a Fr. Gregory Boyle. He is a Catholic priest who founded an organization called “Homeboy Industries,” which works with gangs in South Central L.A. He has written a book called “Tattoos on the Heart,” about his experiences. In his book, he writes, “Homeboy Industries seeks to be what the world is ultimately invited to become: a community of kinship, exquisite mutuality, and tenderness. We stand against forgetting that we belong to each other . . . [and for] Inclusion. Non-violence. Unconditional and compassionate, loving-kindness. And acceptance. At Homeboy, we believe, that only the soul that ventilates the world with tenderness has any chance of changing it.”¹ In the interview that I listened to from the online [Mystic Summit](#),² he talked about the power of extravagant tenderness, which he believes to be the highest form of spiritual maturity. He asks us to imagine a circle of compassion with no one standing outside that circle.

I love the words and images that Father Boyle uses –ventilating the world with tenderness. I picture tenderness blowing through the air, traveling from person to person, from community to community, and touching all God’s children. I believe this is what Jesus had in mind for us.

I find this to be a beautiful, inspiring vision, and yet also a difficult and challenging one. When I look at the world through social media and news stories, I don’t see a whole lot of tender gazing, compassion and inclusion going on. I also often don’t find myself *wanting* to gaze tenderly, compassionately, inclusively upon many of the people whose posts I see, whose stories I hear! And yet, as followers of Jesus, we are called to be part of a movement that brings this tenderness, this compassion, this inclusivity into the world, that ventilates the world with this kind of love.

So here’s an image that helps me to work towards striving to spread this kind of love. It came to me while watching the movie *Stardust*.³ It’s a favorite in our household, an adventure fairy tale complete with magical kingdoms, witches, princes, a fallen star, and of course a hero who has to rescue her. In one scene, there is even a flying pirate ship, commandeered by Captain Shakespeare. The crew’s mission is to fly through severe storms, and gather into containers the lightning that is generated. The ship then lands on shore and this lightning energy is sold to others. The containers, when carefully opened, release their bolts of lightning. For me, somehow, this has become a metaphor of how I picture receiving, and then sharing, God’s healing love.

I picture myself as collecting the powerful energy of God’s love, like those pirates collect lightning, into the container of my heart. For me, this doesn’t happen during severe storms, but rather happens during a quiet time of prayer and meditation. For others it may be during a time of connecting with creation, reading scripture, listening to music, or any number of other ways. But we need to find ways and to make time to collect that energy. And then, after receiving it, we are to open that container, and, for lack of a better word, zap others with love lightning. Okay – so this image might now work for everyone - but I love to picture love energy, prayer energy, healing energy having been received from God as going out from us to other people.

There is another contrast in our two healing stories today. In raising the widow's son, Jesus does his healing ministry hands-on. But in this isolating time we are living in, because of our restrictions during this pandemic, where sometimes the most loving thing we can do is to physically distance ourselves from others, I am especially heartened by the story of the Centurion's slave. Jesus's power traveled to the one who needed healing without Jesus himself having to physically connect with him. I believe we have the power to send healing energy to others from a distance as well – that tenderness, grace, and love, can travel without our having to physically be with others. Using the lightning image, God's love is powerful enough to go out from us and hit those we target, and also those we don't - indiscriminately spreading itself into the world.

Throughout the gospel, we read about Jesus spending time in prayer, being renewed and remembering his own belovedness, and then going out to share that love with others. When we know ourselves loved with that same deep, unconditional, all-encompassing love of God, when we open our hearts to gather that love into ourselves, then we can unleash it into the places it is most needed – to friends and loved ones, to those we might consider our enemies, to those near and far, and to those we don't even know.

This is our call as followers of Christ. May we ventilate this world with tenderness, and be conduits of God's healing, all-encompassing, compassionate love – sharing that love widely and deeply as Jesus did. Amen.

¹ Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion; Simon & Schuster 2010

² <https://mysticssummit.com/program/41555>

³ Vaughn, Matthew, director. 2007. *Stardust*. Paramount Pictures