

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Bill White

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

The Sermon Text — 1 Kings 17:17-24

After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. She then said to Elijah, 'What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!' But he said to her, 'Give me your son.' He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to the Lord, 'O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?' Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the Lord, 'O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again.' The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, 'See, your son is alive.' So the woman said to Elijah, 'Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.'

Luke 7:11-17

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

SERMON

In a few weeks I will complete my 45th year as a pastor. The experience has been overwhelmingly positive, and diverse. I enjoy nearly everything that is a part of a pastor's work: planning, preaching, visiting, counseling, and assisting families with weddings, funerals and baptisms.

There are a few things that I have done that are very painful. At the top of the list is working with parents who have to bury their children. It doesn't matter whether the children are teens, in their early adult years or later in life, it just feels wrong for children to die before their mothers and fathers. It feels like a violation of some divine order.

Today we have two stories where the world is out of order. The first lesson today is about Elijah, a fearless Old Testament prophet who served during a time of national crisis. Prophets were called to make comments about social and political issues, using the word of God for guidance. People today don't like it when pastors make heavy commentary in these areas, particularly if it is commentary contrary to their point of view. They didn't like it during the time of Elijah either, and the prophets often were abused for it.

Elijah's opponent was Ahab, the king of Judah, who had married a foreign queen who had brought her religious practices, along with non-Jewish priests, with her. Elijah condemned the king for allowing such a practice and declared that God would punish the country by sending a famine on the land.

After he made the pronouncement Elijah fled the country ending up at the home of a poor gentile widow, who lived with her only son. At his urging they shared their half filled jar of meal with him. As he predicted, the jar never ran out of meal. They also shared their home with him. Then, suddenly, unexpectedly, the son died. In her grief the woman accused God and Elijah of not caring about her. Elijah was all shook up and said something like this to God, "Is this the way to treat a woman who has shown me nothing but kindness?"

It broke Elijah's heart to see the widow suffer. His compassion led to an elaborate ceremony where he placed his body over the child's body three times. Life was restored.

Many people thought Jesus was the second coming of Elijah. Certainly Jesus shared in Elijah's compassion for the poor, the ill and widows.

In the story we read in Luke's gospel today the heart of Jesus is opened to a grieving widow he had never met. She had already lost her husband. Now she lost her son. Every parent can understand the terror of this situation. As I said earlier, when a parent buries a child it is as if they are violating some divine order.

In this case the boy was his mother's only son. He was her companion and her future. Chances are she had little money, and no pension. Her son was her social security as well as her child and friend. She was left with nothing.

As Jesus looked at the funeral procession he saw this woman alone and defeated. His heart went out to her. He had compassion on her and throwing caution to the wind he moved forward saying, "Do not weep," and touched the casket.

In Jewish culture no one touched a casket. It had the mark of death; it was unclean. All who were watching were shocked. The story says, "The bearers stood still." Compassion, love causes people to do unconventional things. On another occasion when a leper came and said to Jesus, "If you want to, you can make me clean," Jesus, moved with compassion, stepped forward and laid his hands on the man. No one touched a leper for fear of contracting leprosy.

Amazing things happen when we are moved by compassion. A bit over a year ago Bethel pastors conducted memorial services for two homeless men. One died while sleeping on our property. The other man who died was gay. His partner was not allowed by the family to attend the

funeral. Pastor Laura listened to the partner tearfully tell the story. She asked if he would like her to lead a memorial service. He would, and she did. Many of the same people attended these two services. Out of these experiences a spiritual support group for homeless people was born which celebrated its first year just a few weeks ago. Thirty men and women come together each week to have Bible Study, pray and listen to one another. Two Bethel families provide food.

Part way through the first year a book group sprung up. Then, people decided to use our computer room two days a week to help homeless people apply for work. Five or six have joined the church. All of this was planted and nurtured by compassion.

A similar story can be told about Hope House. Two women, Carrie Bernhardt and Clare McArdle knew of the difficult life situation that young single mothers who were homeless faced. These women not only needed a place to live, but they needed to learn life skills – how to cook, care for their children, apply for work, and be attentive to their jobs. In May of 2002 Hope House was born, and dozens of women have found a place to live and learn. 85% of those who lived there have found work and live successfully. Compassion for people in need caused the birth of Hope House and compassion continues to provide care for those who live there.

Many of you in this congregation are moved to compassionately assist Bethel Horizons in caring for some of our city's children who need time to get away at a Christian camp. Thousands of dollars are spent each year here at our food pantry because people of Bethel are moved by compassion for those without.

The word compassion comes from two Latin words that mean, "to suffer with." Compassion leads us to respond to the hurts and pains of people in this world, to share in their brokenness, and participate in their anguish.

The source of our compassion is our God who loved this world so much that he shared in its pain, by suffering with and in some cases for, the separation of world. This God seeks those who were hurting. He heals the sick, and raises the dead. This is the God who does not hold our sins against us. He does not keep score, but erases our dark marks. This is the God we know best through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

When the young man was raised, the crowd was filled with awe. "A great prophet has risen among us!" they shouted. Jesus was one who stood in the line of Elijah and Elisha. He was a God-intoxicated man who cared about the people. And yet he was different than Elijah. Jesus was not one who needed to go through a number of gymnastics in order to heal. He did not need to lay ritually on the young man three times. He healed with a word. The source of the word was God. God was in Christ healing and reconciling the world.

The compassion of God is the source of our compassion. We who know the acceptance of God, the love of God are freed to reach out to others in the same manner. We who know that God has kept his promises to us, are freed to keep our promises to others in marriage and in

friendship. We who know that God has loved us in spite of our sin are freed to love those who err, who stray and are downright unlovable.

Some worry that our nation will fall behind others in technology and information. I worry that we become blind to the hurts of our society. I worry that the affluent will continue to turn their backs on the poor. I worry that the strangers and immigrants in our communities, those hard working people who only want what our ancestors wanted, a chance to find a job and support their families, will become the object of scorn and hatred. I worry that fewer and fewer of our brightest and best are seeking vocations of service, opting rather for careers where big money can be made. We do not lack information in this world. Rather we lack inspiration and compassion.

We are a nation of immigrants. We are a nation of second opportunities. Over our gateway it reads, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." My grandfather Mellem believed he was welcome and planted his family in Vernon County, as did my great grandfather White. Compassion for the stranger made possible my life in America.

Compassion can be found in amazing places. Several nights ago an umpire in Detroit wrongly called a player safe, thus destroying the pitcher's chance at baseball immortality. The man called safe would have been the 27th out of a perfect game.

When he saw the replay the umpire made a confession and an apology. The pitcher, who grew up in Venezuela, an immigrant, patted the umpire on the back and said, "It's ok." The umpire was distraught and cried. The next night, that same umpire was assigned to call balls and strikes. When he came on the field the crowd greeted him with light cheers and the pitcher embraced him again. They all knew that the man who made the mistake needed some love. Compassion ruled the day. Some days people just make you proud.

You and I were baptized into the compassionate blood of Jesus Christ. We continue to be shaped by our compassionate God. We are people who know that "A great prophet has risen among us," and that God has looked favorably on his people." We stand in the line of Elijah and Jesus. Our lineage will forever shape us. Amen. © 2010