

**Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B – June 10, 2013**

Harriet Burke

Reflections on **1 Kings 17:17-24; Galatians 1:11-19; Luke 7:11-17**

**T**wo of our scripture readings today tell the story of widows whose sons have died but are miraculously brought back to life.

The first reading is a follow up story about the widow of Zarephath, who shared her last bit of food with Elijah, the prophet, knowing that after that she and her son would surely die. But Elijah told the widow that because of her generosity her cupboard would never be dry of flour or oil again.

Today we hear that her son was gravely ill and had stopped breathing. The widow turned on Elijah, believing he had brought God's punishment on her and on her son, who was her protector and her sole means of support, because of past sins. Elijah responded by praying fervently three times to God for the life of the child, which God granted. It is a story of hope and consolation, but also a story of God's compassion in answering Elijah's prayer.

The widow in the gospel had a whole entourage mourning with her as her son's body was carried through the streets of Nain. When Jesus saw the group, he was very moved by the mother's grief—so much so, that he reached out to touch the coffin and told the young man to get up, which he did ... and began to speak.

One of the reasons for putting the two stories together is to make the point that Elijah had to *ask* God to intercede in the boy's recovery; whereas Jesus just had to *say the word* and the child was healed.

But we also know the gospel story was told to highlight the compassion of Jesus for those on the margins—those who need support and strength in a variety of ways: physically, emotionally, materially and spiritually—a place where any one of us might find ourselves.

The gospel says, "Jesus was moved with pity," which, in this case, doesn't mean feeling sorry for or having sympathy for the widow. It's more like a verb: Jesus' heart was touched, calling forth an act of love.

In his lifetime Jesus raised three people from the dead that we know of, and all three miracles have a component of compassion:

- the young man in today's story, where Jesus had compassion for the widow;
- Jarius' daughter, because he had compassion for the parents, and of course
- Lazarus, his dear friend, for whom he had compassion, but also because he felt strong compassion for Martha and Mary, Lazarus' sisters.

It is interesting to note the number of women who are a part of the stories of raising people from the dead.

I couldn't help but think of the youngsters as Los Preitos Boys Camp as I read today's gospel.

Three weeks ago eight boys from Los Prietos presented WHAT IF? - an evening that explored issues facing today's youth and asked audiences to imagine a different world. What if . . .

These boys are incarcerated for a variety of non-violent crimes. *All* the boys were either Latino or African-American and spoke freely not only about their connections with gangs but also the fact that they have made poor decisions/ messed up in many different ways. Listening to them, it seemed that a lack of affirmation, low expectations regarding education, maybe a dysfunctional family, drugs or alcohol—all these factors played into their situations.

The United States leads the industrial world in incarcerating youth. In California, Latino youth are two times more likely than whites to be sentenced for a crime; for African American youth, it is six times the incarceration rate.

The last presentation the boys gave was about “not having a voice”—with the judges, with probation officers, with school principals, or with the system.

Though these boys are not dead, I had to question if in some ways they or their mothers might think they have been *pronounced dead* by our society. Are they written off, labeled as trouble makers, seen as druggies, too rough, or simply the wrong color?

Six of us from Beatitudes were at their performance a week ago, and I’ll tell you, the compassion in the room was palpable. Because the six of us hold dear the message of Jesus, we were feeling compassion deeply in our hearts.

Around that same time, a friend of mine who has been a priest for about 15 years confided in me that he is taking a leave from the priesthood. He told me that it is ok to share this story. It is a decision he has been dealing with for the past year. He loves what he is doing; he loves the order that he is part of, but he has fallen in love and so is grappling with the issues of celibacy and marriage. Little by little he has told people who are important in his

life. Some are frustrated, angry, and mad. They have made it very clear that they believe he is making the biggest mistake of his life. Others have tried to understand, though they are heart broken, sad and will miss him.

Where compassion comes alive in this story is that he has asked the men with whom he has lived and worked to be a part of a ritual that sends him forth with their blessing and he, in turn, will bless and thank the men who helped form and mentor him in his priestly life.

Doesn’t that sound much healthier than just leaving without any acknowledgment of what has transpired during the past 15 years? They are all trying to do the compassionate thing.

Here at Beatitudes, part of our mission statement reads “Rooted in the values of *compassion* peace, and justice as taught by Jesus the Christ, we are *actively* creating a new model of church through servant leadership.”

Recently Marshall Ganz was on Bill Moyers. He left Harvard University during the civil rights movement and continued his work with the United Farm Workers before returning to get his PhD. He spoke on Moyers of the importance of three key points in community organizing, especially for people on the margins.

He explains that we each 1) first need to tell our story—of our family, our individual experiences, and the choices we have made that have made us who we are. In other words, we have to know who we are. 2) Then we have to connect “our story” with “the story”—whatever the story is that touches our hearts. For us it would be Jesus, for others Buddha, Gandhi, Dorothy Day and so on. When the two collide—our story and “the story”—then 3) our hearts are moved to action to make the world a better place. Key to the whole process is action.

In the short time we have been a community, Beatitudes has been moved to undertake many actions—Laundry Love, reaching out to the homeless women in the safe parking program, Willbridge outreach, Fonkoze, or our Cherrios ministry just to name a few.

I know your stories of compassion are different than mine but I hope I have

stirred some memories and I also hope you will take time this week to reflect on your own stories of compassion.

Maybe the God within will awaken your heart to a new action, or maybe it will be a delightful way for God to whisper in your ear, “Good job at making a difference in our world.”