

Series: Stretched by Jesus

“Compassionate Authority”

Introduction: We’ve been exploring ways that Jesus stretches us, as revealed by texts in which those who encountered him were astonished or amazed or puzzled by what he did or said. However, last week we looked at a text in which *Jesus* was amazed. He was amazed by the great faith exhibited by a Gentile centurion, a faith which was great, we observed, because it was born in humility and lived out in trust in the words that Jesus spoke. So I ended our time together by having us consider how this centurion might be stretching us, calling us to a more amazing faith, one characterized by a greater humility and a deeper level of trust in Jesus.

Well, I wonder how that sat with you during the week? I ask because I am well aware that you might have said, “An amazing faith? A greater humility and deeper level of trust? Well, I don’t feel so amazing and in fact, I can barely pull myself out of bed in the morning. Given all that I’m dealing with in my life and in this world, I’m lucky to be able to muster any faith at all!” If that is how you are feeling, then take heart, this next passage is for you! For in it, we see Jesus move on from responding to the needs of a powerful and faithful centurion, to meeting the needs of a poor and grieving widow who, given the circumstances of her life, is one who could barely get herself out of bed, and whose faith isn’t mentioned at all! And yet, Jesus moves wonderfully in her life as well, pouring out his compassion upon her. [READ]

I. Mourning in Nain

A. Nain is a village just a few miles away from Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth. It means “pleasant” or “delightful,” but on this particular day, its delight was being overshadowed by a very difficult event. As Jesus and his disciples, and the large crowd that had been tagging along with them, entered the town, I’m thinking they were probably in a joyful and lighthearted mood, enjoying one another’s company, marveling at what they had seen Jesus do, and perhaps even anticipating a delicious lunch at the local deli. And then they met a different kind of crowd moving toward them.

B. It was a funeral procession, and the folk were making their way to the family burial plot which would have been just on the outskirts of town. Sadly, this plot already contained the remains of the woman’s husband. Now she had to lay to rest her only son. Of all the deaths, the death of a child seems the hardest. Psychologist Carl Jung observed that it’s like placing a period before the end of the sentence. Even worse, this woman now had not only further emotional stress to work through but, living in a society that did not have a structured means to provide for her, she would have economic stress to deal with. No husband and no son was not a recipe for good living. Life for this poor widow had come crashing down around her; she was all alone, wondering how she was going to make her way.

II. Met by Jesus

A. But then this woman, in her mourning, was met by Jesus. When he saw her, he was filled with compassion. As Luke describes it, “his heart went out to her.” Literally, it was a word which described one’s intestines, not one’s heart. It would’ve sounded strange to us (hence the use of the word “heart”), but not to them, as the intestines were considered to be the very deepest, inmost part of our being. It

seeks to describe the depth of compassion Jesus felt for this woman. If we allow Jesus to reveal the character of God to us, it gratefully reveals that he is not aloof from human suffering but feels it in the depth of his being. Importantly, not only does he feel compassion toward us, but he has the power to respond as he deems appropriate. Here, we see Jesus do three things.

1. First, he tells her, “Don’t cry.” Now this may strike you as a bit heartless, until we realize that it probably indicates that Jesus had more in mind. As he had recently preached, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh” (Lk. 6:21). And as our psalm for last week reminded us: “weeping may stay for the night but rejoicing comes in the morning” (Ps. 30:5b). Jesus said, “Don’t cry,” because he was about to turn this woman’s tears into an amazing testimony.

2. Second, Jesus touched the plank on which the boy’s body lay. He didn’t have to do this. He could have just skipped this part, you would think. But it was enough to bring the pallbearers to a standstill, stopped motionless in their tracks. They were no doubt shocked because by touching this area, Jesus would have made himself unclean, ritually impure. You just didn’t touch a dead body if you could help it. It points to the depth of his willingness to enter into our existence and become unclean, even cursed, bearing the curse for our sin, as he went to the cross that we might live.

3. Third, Jesus spoke to the dead son and the son sat up and began to talk! Even more significant, perhaps, is that Jesus then gave the boy back to his mother, helping, out of compassion, to return some of the wholeness to her life, and revealing the breadth of good news that Jesus had come to bring to the poor. The crowd, as you might imagine, is awestruck. Talk about being stretched!

The whole event moves those who are thoughtful to hear echoes of the great OT prophet, Elijah, who was involved in a similar kind of episode in which the dead son of a widow was also brought back to life and returned to his mother. A great prophet had appeared among them, they reasoned. The major difference, however, between that great prophet and this one is that Elijah had to stretch himself out on top of the boy three times and cry out for the Lord to act (1 Kings 17:17-24), while Jesus simply spoke to bring about this miracle, as he does on most other occasions as well. Here was not a great prophet but actually one greater than a prophet, which would become clearer as time went on and people began to connect the dots. God had indeed come to help his people in a way far more personal than they could have hoped for or imagined.

III. Pointing Ahead

A. Miracles such as this serve as audiovisuals of the compassionate authority that Jesus brings:

- He has the compassion to meet us in our deepest time of need.
- He can act on our behalf no matter how weak and powerless we, or our faith, may feel.
- The resurrection of the body is not an impossible dream, but one Jesus has come to bring to fruition.
- He has the authority to take the most tragic of moments and turn them into a joyful reunion, one, we will learn as the events of his life unfold, goes well beyond a reunion that lasts only until we die, but a reunion that begins after death and will continue forever. Weeping may remain for a night, but joy comes in the morning.

Let us go to the table of the Lord and remember how Jesus begins to bring this about.