

The Splanchnon of God

Luke 7:11-17

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Heidi and I were reminiscing the other day about the days when our kids were very small. We were remembering the long evenings, sitting on the floor in their room when they were toddlers, going to check the time, and coming back saying, *It's only 6:30*.

We were remembering the time when Sam was three years old and I told him he was not allowed to speak again for ten minutes. Three years olds ask a lot of questions, at least our two did.

When Sam was three, he started asking a lot of questions about God. I wrote down some of the questions he asked in one week.

Isn't it interesting when concrete minded three year olds start trying to wrap their minds around the idea of God? Asking a lot of questions about God. Trying to figure who this God and this Jesus character are that they hear about all the time in Sunday School.

I wrote down some of the questions Sam was asking at that time about God. We were outside, and Sam asked if he climbed up in the tree could God hear him better. I said God could hear him right where he is. He said, *If I yell, could God hear me?*

I said, *I guess so*. So he started just yelling a little bit—nothing in particular.

A three year old hears that God is in heaven, but then he hears that the church is God's house. It's all very confusing when you're trying to figure out who this God character is and where he is.

It would help any three year old, I would think, a lot if we had a picture of God we could show her. If we had a picture of God to show her just like we can show her, let's say, a picture of her baby cousin in Atlanta whom she's never seen. But we can show her a picture.

It would be nice if we had a picture of God. An image. That's what I'm looking for this morning.

There are two crowds in this gospel story this morning, two journeys, with two very different destinations. One crowd of people has gathered around Jesus. They have just witnessed Jesus' healing of the centurion's servant, and they are excited. They are rejoicing in the glorious hope and possibilities and future of God, where life is abundant and full of grace and wonder.

The second crowd surrounds a widow in her misery. This woman has just lost everything, absolutely everything of value to her. First, it had been her husband, and now death has taken her son. In a culture where women were dependent on men for their livelihood, this woman has lost both the men in her life.

Besides that, death is hard enough to handle when it comes late in life. But this woman is mourning the loss of her son, an only

child, the last of the family line. Of course there is weeping and wailing. That's the only way this crowd can make their necessary journey to the graveyard.

Two crowds and two journeys, two radically different destinations. But they meet outside the village of Nain. These two crowds collide there.

[*“A God with Heart”, A Christian Reformed Church Devotion*]

And in that meeting there is a picture of the work of God in Christ in the world. In that meeting of those two crowds there is a picture of God.

As it emerges from the city gate, the funeral crowd meets the other entourage entering the city. Jesus leaves his group and approaches the other group. He looks at the widow, the mother, and says, *Do not weep*.

If the crowd didn't hush then, I'm sure it does when Jesus touches the pallet on which the woman's son lies. And when he bids this dead man rise, he does.

This is another healing story. I really didn't want to preach on this story initially today. When I saw this scripture for today, I thought, *I've preached on several healing stories lately. I've said about all I can say about Jesus healing people right now. I'm going to find something else.*

Jesus heals a lot of people in the Gospel of Luke.

A woman approaches him at a dinner party and pours perfume on his feet.

Another woman battles through a crowd to touch the hem of his garment.

Just before today's story, a centurion sends word through his friends that his servant is ill. *Just give the word*, the man says, *and I know he'll be healed.*

Jesus praises all three people and attributes their healing to their faith. Remember a few weeks ago we looked at the healing of the man by the pool at Bethsaida. This woman today's story is kind of like that man. She doesn't ask Jesus to heal her son. She doesn't ask Jesus to raise her son. She doesn't fall on her knees and beg for her son's life. All she does is cry. There's no mention of faith here at all. Of course, maybe the reason she doesn't ask Jesus for a healing isn't from a lack of faith. Maybe she just thinks it's too late. Her son is dead. But if that's the case, why doesn't she at least say *thank you* after Jesus heals him. Or if she did say *thank you*, why doesn't the gospel writer record her response?

Or the woman's son. When he sits up on the pallet, the gospel writer says that the man begins to speak. But if one of the things he said was *Thank you*, we don't have a record of it.

It could be that mother and son joined in the celebration with the rest of the crowd. More than likely they did. But why didn't Luke tell us that? In other stories in Luke, people's healing is attributed to their faith. Or if the healing happens without a request for it—like the bent-over woman a few chapters later—they at least say thank you or begin praising God. But in today's story? No word about faith. Not one word about gratitude or praise. Just a mother's tears before the raising and a son's random talking after it.

[thanks to Dr. Kim Buchanan, “From Procession to Party”, www.day1.net]

What is the point of this story if it’s not about faith or gratitude? That’s why I decided to go ahead and preach on this passage today. Because this story has a different point.

What this story is about—the center of this story—is the *splanchnon* of God. In the very middle of this story is a phrase, right there is verse 13 there is a phrase, that is the primary focus of this story.

It is what the gospel writer wants to emphasize more than anything else in this event. It is the picture, the image, that Luke wants to emphasize more than faith or gratitude on the part of the woman or her son. This story is not about them.

What it says there in our English translation is that when Jesus saw this grieving widow whose son had died, he *had compassion for her*.

The Greek word there for what Jesus felt is the verb form of *splanchnon*. I actually pulled my Greek New Testament off the shelf this week, found this passage in there, and looked at this word. I was hoping someone would walk in my office and see me reading this passage in Greek. That is something I do at least once every two years or so.

But I wanted to take a good look at this word. This word has a real physical imagery to it. Literally what it means is that Jesus opened up his guts to her. It’s basically a wimpy translation to say he felt compassion or had mercy.

What it’s literally talking about are Jesus’ inner parts, his guts. The glossary in my Greek New Testament says the word refers to *entrails*. The King James actually translates it *bowels*. What this is talking about is the deep inner feelings of Jesus that go way beyond “heartfelt concern” or anything like that.

In other words, when Jesus was confronted with the pain and loss of this woman, he was shaken up in his gut with compassion for her.

So the center piece of this story, the heart of this story is verse 13. And it says, *When Jesus saw the woman, his guts opened up with compassion for her*.

The *splanchnon* of God. How’s that for a picture of God? Do you know what that means? The guts of God. There is no superficial sentimentality here. The gut-wrenching compassion of God.

There are only two other places in the Gospel of Luke that this word is used. There are many places where Jesus is said to have compassion or have mercy. But there are only two other places in Luke where the word *splanchnon* is used. [thanks to an essay entitled “Why Should Doctors have all the Good Words?” by Dr. Bill Long at www.drbilllong.com] And those two places just happen to be the two most famous stories in the New Testament. Both of them stories told by Jesus.

One is the story of the Good Samaritan. A man is beaten by thieves and left half-dead by the side of the road. A priest and a Levite walk on by. And then here’s what Jesus says, *But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity*. What is actually says is, *When he*

saw him, he “*splanchnon-ed*” him. His very insides opened up with compassion for the man.

The other story in which this word *splanchnon* is used is the story of the prodigal son.

As you remember that story, the younger son asked for part of his inheritance early from his father. Under Jewish law a father couldn't just leave his estate however he wanted to whomever he wanted to. The elder son was required to get two-thirds and the younger one-third. And if you were the third son, like me, I guess you didn't get anything.

So, the younger son went to his father and said, *Dad, I want right now that one-third share I've got coming to me.* And he went off with his inheritance and blew the whole thing on liquor and women and fancy clothes until finally he had nothing left and he had to go to work or starve to death.

He gets a job on a pig farm and stays with it long enough to observe that the pigs might be getting a better deal than he is. And he decides to go home.

He finally came to his senses and decided to come home and beg to be taken back-- not as a son but in the lowest rank of slaves-- the hired servants. So the son sets out on his return trip all the way rehearsing his speech: *Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*

He had no idea how much his father had missed him.

He had no idea the number of times his father had paused between chores to look out the front gate for his son.

The boy had no idea the number of times his father had awakened from a restless sleep, gone into his son's room, and sat on the boy's bed, and prayed that he was alright.

He had no idea that his father was waiting for him to return. Scanning the horizon for any sign of him.

And here's how Jesus puts it. It may be the most heartbreaking grouping of words in the history of the written language, as far as I'm concerned.

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and was filled with compassion for him. What Jesus actually said was, While he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and “splanchnon-ed” him.

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with gut wrenching compassion for his son, and he opened himself up and let that compassion pour out from his innermost being.

As I said before, we were remembering those days when Sam was three years old and was asking us a lot of questions about God. Those were the questions I was talking about that I wrote down. One time asked me, *Where does God sit?* Evidently he had heard something about God sitting in heaven or sitting on his throne or something like that.

I said, *Well, I guess God sits in heaven.* I was never good at answering these questions. I know 3 year olds need concrete images. I said, *Maybe God sits in a chair.*

Sam said, *God doesn't sit in a chair.*

I thought about that this week when I was considering this story and the need for a picture of God, an image. I think Sam was right. God doesn't sit in a chair. In fact, if you had a picture of God, I don't think God would be sitting at all.

I think if you could carry around a picture of God in your wallet to look at at those moments when you needed to be reminded of who God is—in moments where you are experiencing pain or loss, in moments when life has left you hurting and cast aside on the side of the road, in moments where you are coming to yourself and realizing your own sin and unworthiness.

If you could carry around a picture of God to look at in those moments, I think the picture would show God, not sitting, but he's standing, he's looking, he's running to the gate, he's got his arms open wide, while you were still a long way off.

It sounds beautiful. But it's not a pretty picture, on the surface. If you don't know what it really is, you might even think it's kind of gross.

It's a picture that would show the *splanchnon* of God. The guts of God. Gut wrenching compassion. God opening up himself in great humility and vulnerability. Exposing his innermost being and letting it spill out in love and mercy and compassion for you.

You won't find that picture hanging on a wall anywhere, that's for sure.

But you will find it hanging on a cross.

A picture of God. The *splanchnon* of God. And it is beautiful—profoundly so.