

Sunday, June 9, 2013: Luke 7:11-17

by [E. Louise Williams](#) in the [May 29, 2013](#) issue

We see it every day on the news—the raw grief of a parent whose child has died, perhaps in a drive-by shooting or while serving in Afghanistan. Sometimes the tragedy is tied to an automobile accident. We hear of these deaths so often that we become numb to the pain. Then comes something like the shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. Parents, friends and neighbors weep. We see pictures of smiling boys and girls and hear of their talents, their passions and their joy. There is a particular poignancy when we hear that one of the dead was an only child. We cannot ignore the grief. We respond viscerally.

Like the Newtown parents, the widow at Nain lost a child. She felt the raw grief of any parent whose child has died, and as the child was her only child, she despaired at the loss of her identity and support. Her social security and status were gone.

With all that Jesus had seen in his ministry so far, we might expect that he would have shown some evidence of compassion fatigue. Instead he found the scene gut-wrenching. He responded to the bereft widow with “Do not weep” and then touched the bier, told the dead young man to arise and gave him back to his mother, thus restoring her life as well.

Compassion is a feeling from deep inside. Luke uses the same word to describe the response of the Samaritan upon seeing the one who was beaten and robbed (Luke 10:33) and the response of the father who saw his lost son returning home (Luke 15:20). The Greek for the word that Luke chooses comes from *splagchnizomai*, which suggests a churning of the entrails or a turning of the womb. In Hebrew, *compassion* and *womb* are even more clearly from the same root.

We might say that compassion is womb love. In one sense it is seeing another as a sibling, as one born from the same womb. Dorothee Soelle captures this in her book *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity*. She tells the story of a rabbi who asked his students how to recognize the moment when night ends and day begins.

“Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a dog from a sheep?” one student asked.

“No,” said the rabbi.

“Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a date palm from a fig tree?” another student asked.

“No,” said the rabbi.

“Then when is it?” the students asked.

“It is when you look into the face of any human creature and see your brother or your sister there. Until then, night is still with us.”

In another sense, this womb love might be understood as mother’s love. It is the feeling God expresses through the prophet Isaiah: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands” (Isa. 49:15–16a). Womb love is love that knows that mother and child are inseparably connected. It is love that desires the child to grow into the fullness of life, that knows when to hold and embrace, when to let go and when to push the child out of the nest into the world. It is the longing a mother has for all her children to return home and gather around a thanksgiving table.

Whether sibling love or mother love, compassion is not just feeling. It finds expression in word and action. The message comes through loud and clear in Luke. The family of God includes outsiders—those there because of accidents of birth, like the gentile centurion and his sick servant; those there because of circumstances of their lives, like this bereft widow; even those there because of choices they have made, like the criminal on the cross next to Jesus. They all belong to the reign of God that Jesus ushers in. Compassion doesn’t give up but keeps translating and retranslating the message until all can hear in their own language and know that they belong.

The actions of compassion are always life-giving, but they often take one into the risky places of death and defilement. For the Good Samaritan it meant getting close to someone’s open wounds and going out of his way to provide care. For the prodigal father it meant risking ridicule from his community when he embraced

someone who'd been living in a pigsty. For Jesus, it meant touching a funeral bier that foreshadowed his own death.

“God has looked favorably on his people,” the people said after Jesus raised the widow’s son. God gives us birth, looks on us with compassion, with womb love, with mother love, and sees the family resemblance. God also empowers us to look with the same eyes on one another.