

When Jesus Shows Up

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Luke 7:1-17

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It was spring in 2007 and I was at McCormick Seminary in the library working on a paper, trying desperately to not be distracted by the beautiful blue sky sunny day just outside my window, when my phone rang. It was one of the pastors at St. Mark Presbyterian in Ballwin, Missouri, the church I grew up in, where I fell in love with the Presbyterian Church and the church that gifted me with a scholarship that enabled me to go to seminary and remain debt free. For these and many other reasons, this church is close to my heart. St. Mark's senior high youth group needed an adult to co-lead their mission trip. There were five youth excited to go to New Orleans and serve its community, but only one adult willing to take them. The pastor asked if I would be willing to be the other chaperone. I responded immediately that I'd be happy to!

Seven of us left St. Louis on a similarly beautiful day to that one back in the spring, although it was much hotter. St. Louis in the summer is sweltering! And we began our adventure. Recognizing a dearth in adult leadership, St. Mark leaders wisely chose a trip that was organized through Group Ministries and all we had to do was show up. The rest was planned. Each day we would leave the elementary school, our home away from home, to serve a community still rebuilding almost two years after Hurricane Katrina devastated their city. Before leaving we had breakfast, made our lunches and had morning devotional time, 20 minutes of quiet time with God, to read scripture, to pray, to listen. Twenty minutes to prepare one's heart for the day; 20 minutes to ground oneself in the reality that, in this set aside time and space, you have the opportunity and mission to be Jesus' hands and feet for someone else.

We were Jesus' hands and feet. We heard this many times from group leaders. Not a phrase the kids heard much in youth group at St. Mark. Not a phrase that I heard much at Fourth Presbyterian or in seminary. Jesus' hands and feet. Really? By putting up dry wall, we were being Jesus' hands and feet?

Jesus' hands and feet were weary when he entered Capernaum that day so long ago, after he had preached his sermon on the plain to crowds of people from cities near and far. Word had spread about this extraordinary rabbi and everyone wanted to learn from him.

After teaching much (detailed in chapter 6) Jesus comes to the city of Capernaum and is soon approached by Jewish elders of the community.

They came to make a plea on behalf of a well-respected Roman Centurion whose valuable slave was gravely ill and needed a miracle to survive. Would Jesus heal him? Despite the fact that the soldier was a Gentile and not a Jew, despite the fact that he was an outsider, these men have come to Jesus to beg him to help the man by healing his slave. They cared for him, because the soldier had cared for them. He loved them, and even built a synagogue for them!

A little while later, a second delegation gives Jesus another message, this time directly from the Centurion, a message of humility (an odd characteristic for this powerful leader).

They relate that the Centurion is not worthy to be in Jesus' presence, and he knows this presence is not necessary to heal his slave. Jesus only needs to say the word and his slave will be well. What great faith had he! A Gentile and a believer! Jesus is amazed and exclaims to all around him, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (Luke 7:9). The Centurion's slave is healed.

When Jesus shows up, life as it was ends and a life of new possibility begins.

Jesus cares for all. Jesus cares especially for the widow and grieving mother he finds in the town of Nain: "When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her..." (v.13). This woman's life became difficult the moment her husband died. Her life effectively ends with the death of her only son. In Israel, inheritance went first to sons, then to daughters and then to the deceased's family of origin. The widow would be left with absolutely nothing. As one commentator summarized: "... [W]ith no male relative to secure her place in patriarchal culture, she is lost (Torrence 192)." Lost in her world, lost in her life, lost in her grief.

Tears are streaming down the widow's face as her son is carried out of the city in the funeral procession, toward the grave where he will be buried. She is surrounded by community yet is utterly alone. Jesus comes to her and says, "Do not weep."

Then he moves toward the dead son, lying on a bier, which is similar to a cot. The corpse is wrapped in linen but is not enclosed. Jesus commands, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" And one who was dead becomes alive again. Wow. All that are gathered are awestruck and a little afraid. Who is this Jesus?! A prophet! But also more than a prophet, for he has not only commanded God to bring one back to life, but has the authority to bring forth that life, with a mere touch of the bier.

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In both of these stories, the works of Jesus' hands and feet are miraculous and otherworldly. For the crowds and disciples who are following him, it is clear: when Jesus shows up, what is is not what will be. Anything, absolutely anything, is possible.

That summer week in New Orleans, when we acted as Jesus' hands and feet, there were no miraculous healings although I do think it was a miracle that no one got hurt during our construction work! And yet, from death came life and new possibilities as homes were repaired, painted and cleaned, and residents began to hope for a bright future instead of wallowing in the dark past. Jesus did show up, and it was in a similar way to today's passages.

What caused Jesus' hands and feet to move as they did? Two distinct stories of Jesus' healing, the Roman Centurion and the widow have one important thing in common: both are completely and utterly dependent on Jesus to heal their loved ones. They are relying on Jesus' compassion and concern for their situation to move him to bring God's life-restoring power. They are desperate. In his acts of healing, Jesus is offering deep compassion for them both. It is this compassion that brings about the miraculous healing; the compassion itself is also a miracle.

As ordained Presbyterian Pastor and writer Frederick Buechner defines it: "Compassion is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy for you too (Buechner, 65)." Again, he said: "There can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy for you too." Knowing this changes every action we make. When we know this, Jesus shows up.

Jesus lived out his deep compassion for the wellbeing of the Roman and widow. In New Orleans, for that week, the seven of us lived out our deep compassion for strangers who became friends, friends whose peace and joy were robbed by wind, rain and debris that invaded with fury as quickly as it died down and left nothing but an eerie calm. So, like Jesus, we moved and acted out of deep compassion for others. We became Jesus' hands and feet.

When we live out of compassion, we all become Jesus' hands and feet. Roman Catholic saint and Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila describes this reality beautifully: "Christ has no body now on earth but yours; yours are the only hands with which he can do his work, yours are the only feet with which he can go about the world, yours are the only eyes through which his compassion can shine forth upon a troubled world. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

Last month both the Session and the Board of Deacons had their first meetings of the year. These meetings marked the beginning of the terms for the Classes of 2020. This was the first time that each body had those particular folks at the tables; both groups were new and unique.

To set the tone for the upcoming ministry of these ordained leaders, Clerk of Session Greg Boyer had the idea to begin the meetings with a hand washing service as the devotional. It seemed appropriate that before commencing, the ministries for governing the church and caring for its members, these groups should first be reminded of the One whose ministry they follow. The hand washing was a sacramental act to prepare the ruling elders and deacons to lead, to live out the calls God had given them. Before offering compassion in Jesus' name, the leaders experienced the compassion that moved Jesus' hands and feet.

The book of John offers us an example of a similar washing act when Jesus washes his disciples' feet. Unlike the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus' final supper with his disciples is not about eating with them; it is about serving them in the most humble of ways, by washing their feet. Through this, Jesus enacted the utmost love he had for his dear friends, his disciples.

In this act, one by one washing the men's feet (much to their befuddlement), Jesus combined three roles. As rabbi — he had spent many days teaching; as host — they had come to dinner at his invitation; as servant — in the ancient world, where feet were the dirtiest parts of one's body (like our hands today), the servant of the home or the guest himself would wash before entering a home. This was never the task of the host!

Jesus turned tradition on its head by washing his friends' feet. He also forever altered his relationship with each of them, for by receiving Jesus' hospitality in this vulnerable way, the disciples were receiving his love, receiving God's love for them. Through this act of

compassion, Jesus showed up for the disciples, changing their worlds from what was to something entirely different. Now, filled with God's love, they could understand its depth at a new level.

From that last Supper, hours before Jesus' death, the disciples left renewed, focused and yearning to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all who would listen. They left ready to be Jesus' hands and feet in the world.

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In just a few minutes we will celebrate the Lord's Supper. We will be renewed, refocused and filled with a yearning to spread the love of God that overflows from us. We are truly Jesus' hands and feet. He has no body on earth but ours.

As you receive the bread and cup at your seats this morning, I invite you to imagine being at table with Jesus. Imagine that before sitting down, he takes time to wash your hands to prepare you for the meal you'll share. As well as hosting you, Jesus serves you. Jesus loves you.

May we be filled with this deep love to overflowing, giving us the courage, energy and desire to be Jesus' hands and feet for the loved one, the friend, the stranger, the community, the world; for people who need help and compassion, people who need Jesus to show up. Amen.

Works Cited

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Torrence, Margaret Lamotte. 2014. "Luke 7:11-17: Pastoral Perspective" in *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 1*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press pp. 190,192, 194.