

C Ordinary 10
 2013 June 9
 Psalm 146
 1 Kings 17:17-24
 Luke 7:11-17
 "Passing Through Nain"



Over the past few decades the word “power” has entered our modern vocabulary in a new way. Business people have “power lunches,” whatever those are. I think they used to be called “business lunches,” but somehow, in our power-hungry culture, they were given a more hip name. We have “power walking,” too. I think I understand that.

When you read the word “power” in the new testament, nine times out of ten it comes from the Greek word *dunamis*, which means the potential for functioning in some way, power, might, strength, force, capability. You can also hear how it has produced some related English words: dynamic, for example. It is also the root for our word, dynamite. The concept of power has a precise definition in the science of physics, also, related to the magnitude of a force and how long the force is applied.

The concept of power is one that people have understood as long as there were people. Countless wars have been fought between tribes and nations, for thousands of years. Although there are some exceptions, the side with the most power, the most soldiers, the best technology, the best strategists, is the side that wins in battle.

The little nation of Israel was constantly in fear of being overrun by her neighbors, and was, in fact, very often. The Philistines, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and finally the Romans all threatened or conquered tiny Israel, even though God was beside and with the Israelites in accordance with the covenant God made with them. The power that other nations held over Israel, they understood to be a consequence of their unfaithfulness and injustice. These people, like all people everywhere, understood power.

When Jesus of Nazareth walked the roads and streets of Palestine, the dominant power was Rome. There seemed to be no force anywhere that could stand up to the power of the Roman legions, their training, their discipline, their equipment, their sheer numbers.

Once again, the people of Israel found themselves under the dominion and control of a foreign people.

On one particular day, Jesus and his disciples are approaching the little town of Nain, along with a large crowd. Nain, as it turns out, was only a few miles from his hometown of Nazareth. As he comes to the gates of the city, he encounters a funeral procession leaving. Luke tells us the man who has died is the only son of a particular widow. Luke writes, "When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." He walked to the stretcher or bier on which the man was being carried, and said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" Luke tells us, "The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother." The crowd was seized with fear, and they glorified God, saying "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people."

We know, of course, that in touching the bier, Jesus ran the risk of becoming ritually unclean. In the Book of Numbers, the Lord forbids any contact with the dead. Jesus didn't care. As is so often the case, when the Jewish Law comes in conflict with compassion, compassion wins.

The gospels are, of course, filled with stories of Jesus' miraculous healings and exorcisms. This one is different from the majority of them in one important way: the woman does not ask Jesus for help. Apparently before she even knew who he was, he was filled with compassion, went to the dead man, and raised him. Jesus required no expression of faith from this woman. He simply responded to her pain and grief. Remember that a widow with no son in ancient Palestine was very likely to live the rest of her life in shame and in poverty. There were no civil safety nets like Social Security or Medicaid. Not only was this woman bereft of her husband and her only son, but she was facing grinding poverty and hopelessness, unless her people actually did what was written in their law and commanded by their prophets, that they care for the widows among them.

Luke has a second narrative of Jesus raising a young person from the dead, which we find in chapter 8. There he encounters an official of the local synagogue, whose daughter is close to death. Indeed, by the time Jesus reaches the house, the girl has died. Jesus raises this child, too.

Luke writes the account from today's reading in chapter 7 with the passage we have heard from 1 Kings strongly in mind. In both cases, the healer, whether Elijah or Jesus, raises a young man, and (quote) "gives him to his mother." Luke takes that language directly from the Greek version of Kings that he would have read. Jesus is cast as a great healer and miracle-worker in the line of Elijah, Elisha, and other prophets of the Old Testament. In fact, some biblical scholars are convinced that one of Luke's primary purposes is to show Jesus to be an eschatological prophet, that is, a prophet whose appearance signifies that the Day of the Lord is coming soon.

Jesus is also the one who brings with him the Kingdom of God. Amazing things happen in the Kingdom, which is of course already present with us, but not yet complete. Things like miraculous healings and dead people being reanimated.

Both Elijah and Jesus are motivated by a deep compassion. And both men demonstrate the great power of God to do amazing things, even raising the dead to life. If you are a fan of the Spiderman movie trilogy, you will remember the words of Peter Parker's uncle Ben: "With great power comes great responsibility." There is a tremendous measure of truth in those words. But we learn from today's passage from Luke that, when we are speaking of the living God, "With great power comes great compassion."

In recent weeks we have been buffeted by the deaths of a number of saints in our congregation, and in fact, there have been six of them since the beginning of the year. Theologians and biblical scholars have produced reams and reams of thought dealing with the question of why a good God allows us to suffer, including the loss of people we love, and they have come up with some truly sound and well-reasoned results. But when one is in the midst of deep suffering, they mostly fall flat. The most profound reasoning just doesn't provide comfort when one is overwhelmed by grief.

William Sloan Coffin was the noted pastor of Riverside Church in New York City during the 1970's and '80's. Coffin's 24-year-old son, Alex, died driving his car in a driving rainstorm one night. No one knows exactly what happened. All that's sure is that his car ran off a bridge into the Boston Harbor and sank. Ten days later Coffin delivered "A Eulogy for Alex," and struggled in that sermon with the BIG QUESTION: Why? One thing he could not tolerate, and would not entertain, is the thought that God would cause such a horrific event to happen. "God is not a cosmic sadist," in his words.

I sincerely wish I could have been present for that sermon. One of the nation's finest preachers, dealing with some of the most agonizing questions we humans can face. But he does so with utmost trust in the God who has cared for him and for Alex. He writes, "The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, "It is the will of God." Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."

When any one of us here gathered have suffered with physical or emotional illness, God was there suffering with us. And whenever any one of us has been forced to say goodbye to a dear one, we affirm that God's heart was the first to break. Beyond all the thousands of books and articles that have been written trying to explain why we suffer, I find this certainty most comforting.

Elijah raises the widow's son. Jesus raises the widow's son. In both cases, death does not prevail. Indeed, we claim with joy the truth that in the death and resurrection of the Son of God, death has been defeated. We know that one day we will gather with saints

from all times and places, singing and praising the God whose compassion extends even beyond the grave.

God's power is not anything like the power of the world, demonstrated in subjection and domination and cruelty and inhumanity. The power of God, the power of Jesus Christ, is a power drenched in compassion. God doesn't have to, and indeed cannot, separate power and compassion. In the being of God, they are intertwined and connected intimately, so that they can never be parted. God's compassion is power compassion. God's power is compassion power.