

We're half way in our journey following the Epiphany star. We began as the Magi did, dazzled by the beauty of the Christ child, a king found unexpectedly among the poor and the vulnerable. We received our 'starwords' to guide us throughout the year (the basket of starwords is still back there. If you didn't get one you should. It's our guide, as we pray that God would use it to lead us into new places and new understanding this year.) We, like the Magi, are on this journey to see what it means that Christ was born. What does it mean that God took human form and chose to live as one of us? What does it mean that we are called to follow in the way of Jesus?

Our Epiphany journey began with Jesus proclaiming his purpose, reading from the words of Isaiah: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,*

*because the Lord has anointed me.*

*He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,*

*to proclaim release to the prisoners*

*and recovery of sight to the blind,*

*to liberate the oppressed,*

*and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

That's what Jesus understood himself to be about; that's what he saw as his purpose. So he got busy doing, what? Teaching a rag-tag bunch of fisher folk and women what God's new creation should look like, right there in their little towns, in their busy, harried lives. He got busy healing and feeding and raising the dead, showing those who followed him what good news for the poor looked like, what release meant to prisoners, what sight revealed to the blind, what liberation felt like for the oppressed and that all of that was the Lord's favor proclaimed.

That's the setting of our two little stories today. They show Jesus' good news for the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed revealed in a healing and a dead man being raised.

READ LUKE 7: 1-17

These two stories together: a Centurion whose slave is healed by Jesus, side-by-side with the story of a widow's son resurrected from the dead, make us sit up and take notice of how Jesus really works in the world.

First, we see the loss these two people experience in this story. The centurion lost his slave, valued but still a slave, property. He may have been valued for what he could do, for the work he produced; or the status he gave the centurion. The Centurion was rich and powerful enough to have a slave. Maybe he was valued for who he was. Maybe he was a good companion for the centurion. But, still he was a slave. He could be replaced. A new slave could be purchased if he died.

The widow lost her son. She lost a relationship, a close relationship; one we can imagine as loving, caring bringing joy or at least contentment. Their relationship may not have been loving, we don't know. But in that culture losing her son meant the widow also lost her future. Without a husband or any sons, her future would be dangerous and vulnerable at best, because in that culture women usually relied upon male relatives for their well-being. In restoring her son, Jesus

not only soothes her grief, he restores her chances of surviving within society. Her son was irreplaceable. His future was gone but so was hers.

That's what is lost in these stories. But, what is gained through Jesus' intervention?

For the Centurion, property is restored. The slave may have been a friend as well, but essentially he was property that could, at least in some regards, have been replaced. Jesus healed the slave, returning the Centurion's property to him.

For the widow, relationship is restored: love, purpose, possibility for happiness and contentment. But, certainly security and even life were made possible by Jesus' resurrecting this man from the dead.

Why did Jesus heal the centurion's slave and the widow's son?

We're told that the elders interceded on behalf of the slave because they thought the centurion was "worthy" of Jesus' help. They said the centurion loved the Jews and had built the synagogue for them. The elders had benefitted from the love and actions of the centurion and so they wanted Jesus to help him. Even though the Centurion thought himself unworthy of Jesus' help, the elders interceded on his behalf. Jesus names the Centurion's faith as extraordinary and the slave is healed without Jesus seeing the slave or even going near him.

But, no one intercedes or even seems to notice the widow in her grief and despair. Even though Jewish law clearly commanded care of widows as a primary responsibility for people of God, no one spoke for her. No one brought her to Jesus' attention. Instead, Jesus simply saw her in passing and was moved with compassion. This compassion is not just feeling bad for her loss. The Greek word for compassion here is a gut-wrenching turmoil that moves Jesus so deeply that he consoles her; but more than that - he crosses the purity boundary that said that Jews must not touch a dead person or anything they touched or they would be unclean and would be required to go through a long process to be clean again.

Jesus touched the stretcher, making himself unclean, in order to bring the boy back to life. His compassion was so great that he broke a fundamental law of Jewish life, to not just heal this man, but to bring him out of death back to life, restoring him, but also restoring the widow, giving her her life back as well.

There's more going on here than just miracles. Miracles always point to God and what God is doing. Jesus' disciples were there watching. They were just beginning to learn what it meant to follow Jesus and he does this!

Jesus heals an outsider, someone who is NOT a Jew because of the humble faith of his owner at the request of elders who had themselves, neglected the care of the widow. The elders interceded

on behalf of a powerful man because of what he had done for them, building a synagogue in which they upheld the purity laws. Surely, they must have thought, that is how God works: God rewards those who do good deeds, those who sustain the good work of the law keepers, the boundary keepers.

But, Jesus names the centurion's humble faith as his motivation, NOT the centurion's good works. Not a word is said about what he DID or the fact that the religious people vouched for him. It was the Centurion's humility, not even thinking of asking Jesus for help that moved Jesus to heal his slave.

Then, Jesus not only heals, but resurrects the widow's son from death to life. Jesus crosses the purity boundary of the faith out of compassion for the widow's grief at the loss of her son and also the loss of her own life. She has done nothing to earn this gift of new life. She did not build a synagogue. She did nothing we can imagine to maintain the keeping of the law. She did nothing. Jesus' act was pure, unearned grace; it was God's compassion that healed the boy and restored him and his mother to life.

This is good news to the poor, who are unable to build synagogues or even feed their families. This is release to the prisoners bound by laws that enforce rules for the wealthy and powerful. This is sight for those of us who are blind to how Jesus' free gift of grace has been perverted by those who want to use him to manipulate people into believing that God helps those who help themselves.

No, the arrival of the year of the Lord's favor means we can do NOTHING to earn the resurrection and the healing that we receive. We receive that and everything: life, hope and resurrection because of who God is: compassionate, full of grace and truth, abounding in steadfast love!

Immediately before today's reading in the book of Luke is what is known as the beatitudes where it says, "Woe to you who are rich for you have received your consolation." (You have already been paid in full, in other words.) The Centurion received back his property – he had been paid in full. The elders received the synagogue that the Centurion built where they could enforce their purity laws – they had been paid in full.

But, the widow and her son, neglected by the righteous elders, were also mentioned in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh" with the laughter that only God can give.

May we who are called to follow Jesus receive God's freely given grace with open hearts, and share it with those in need of God's hope and life and love. Amen.

