Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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The Gate of Nain
Luke 7:11-17

This story keeps circling around to me, as if it is begging to be preached! It’s found only in Luke’s Gospel, and is rarely mentioned. This happened at The Gate of Nain, a small village about 5 miles from where Jesus lived.

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11 Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. 12 As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. 13 When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, “Do not weep.” 14 Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” 15 The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 16 Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has risen among us!” and “God has looked favorably on his people!” 17 This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

(I bet it did spread. Raising somebody from the dead tends to make the news!)

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There’s something extremely interesting about this story. We are not given the names of the widow, or her son. You would think we could get a “Mary” or a “Simon,” or something, but no names. And it doesn’t appear that Jesus knows their names. He calls him, “Young man…”

And no one even asks Jesus to do this! As far as we know, they didn’t know who he was. There was no expression of faith. No prayer for healing. No one joins the church or signs a pledge card! The mother doesn’t call on the Lord. We don’t even have a conversation here! Jesus just sees a funeral and raises this nameless man from the dead.

What we do have is the motive. Compassion!

When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, “Do not weep.” (7:13)

It’s the stories of compassion we all remember.

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It being Father’s Day, I have numerous stories of my father’s compassion, but the one that sticks out was actually at his funeral, odd as that may sound.

He was a United Methodist minister for over 40 years and served Christ in churches all over eastern North Carolina. After his Memorial Service, our family gathered in the Fellowship Hall to receive those who attended. The line was long and everyone had very kind words to say, but I noticed a pattern.

No one mentioned how many Capital Campaigns he had done. No one said anything about how much the budgets and memberships had increased in all his churches. Not a single word about any of his sermons. What they did tell me were brief stories of compassion. How he had been there when someone’s wife died. How he went out of his way to make a mentally-challenged person feel important. How he cared for the widows, and blessed the children. It all sounded very familiar!

How many stories of compassion can you remember; times when someone came to The Gate of Nain in your life and changed things for you? Those are the stories we never forget.

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Our daughter was diagnosed with diabetes when she was ten years old. She’s now thirty-five and doing great. I was 40 years old back then and serving a middle-sized church. We had one income, three kids and credit cards sitting on the limit. Needless to say, things were tight and the medical bills were piling up.

One night at a Session meeting, after we plowed through the business, the clerk asked me if I would step out for a minute. I thought, “Oh great! Now I’m getting fired for something!” When they asked me back in, the clerk said, “We know Catherine and you are going through a tough time. We’d like to help with some of the medical costs.” And he handed me a check for $10,000. It might as well have been 10 million! That was my Gate of Nain, my point of need, and their compassion changed our story. You don’t ever forget that.

Compassion shows up in a variety of ways. It’s not always money. It can be time. More often than not, it’s heart. You shared someone’s pain, someone’s struggle, someone’s private battle. You stopped at their Gate of Nain. You saw them. You met them at their place of greatest need with the compassion of Christ. That’s what people remember.

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Jesus is just passing through when this funeral procession interrupts his agenda, and then he interrupts the funeral. He sees a widow whose only son has died. In their world, that meant she has no status, no power, no income, no hope for the future. He knew what that meant. He saw her. So he turns to this widow and says, “Do not weep.” (Luke 7:13b). She has every reason to weep, until his compassion changed things.
That’s what compassion does. It interrupts the way things are with the way things can be. The funeral is cancelled that day because of the compassion of Christ. Jesus touches the casket and the dead man sits up and begins to speak. He gives the young man back to his mother. They both got their lives back!

I wish that happened at every funeral, but compassion does change the narrative when it shows up. Whatever was going on at The Gate of Nain that day went a different direction because of the compassion of Christ.

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Last week after a round of golf, a fellow, who is not a member of this church, asked me a very interesting question. He said, “Steve, what would you say should be the top 3 priorities of the Church today?” (That’s not normally what people are talking about after a round of golf!) I had to think about that for a minute.

The first thing that popped into my mind was compassion. The world needs a compassionate Church. Everything Jesus did came from a heart of compassion.

Matthew tells us…

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:36)

When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. (Matthew 14:14)

He called his disciples to him and said, ‘I have compassion for the crowd because they have been with me for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.’ (Matthew 15:32)

Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. (two blind guys) Immediately they regained their sight and followed him. (Matthew 20:34)

It’s all about compassion! All of it.

- He forgave Peter for denying him three times, and Paul for persecuting the church.
- He took time to bless the children out of compassion.
- The parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan were based on compassion.
He knelt down to wash his disciples’ feet, stood before Pilate, hung on the cross, and got up from the dead. It was all driven by compassion. All of it! About compassion.

Compassion would be the top three priorities for any church. How does that translate to Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church? In every way. Sequoyah is a compassionate church, but there are always more Gates of Nain. Some churches get preoccupied with painting the gate while they neglect those who are suffering under it!

With your new pastor on the horizon, I do not presume to have a vision for this church, but I do know this. Every church needs to deepen its compassion for the world in which we live today. Every church must go beyond its walls to The Gate of Nain, to those places where people suffer and are in great need. Not as charity, but as followers of Jesus Christ! That’s where he’s been. That’s where he is now, and that’s where he will always go. To be the Church is to go there with him.

We’ve got to be that church or we will slowly begin to die. We’ve got to put The Gate of Nain in our budgets, on our master calendars, and in our hearts. Everything changes there! And in the end, that’s all anybody is going to remember anyway. The compassion of Christ.

May Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church be forever known as a church of deep compassion...at The Gate of Knoxville, and at all other gates to which Christ will lead you!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Congregation: Amen