

down in the face of pain and instead actually listen, see, and understand what others are really going through. Maybe there's a way to help, just like there was for the jeweler in Maui. Maybe the gift is simply our presence. When we try to offer compassion in that way, abundant life may emerge. Christ may come and offer a glimmer of resurrection.

Back in 2020, the world and especially the schools had shut down. Our church received a request to host a small group of kids who wanted to do their online learning together. We knew about the struggles kids and families were facing at that strange time, and this was a small way we could help. So for nearly a year, we had four first grader students and their teacher use a space in our building as their classroom. They played on our playground for recess and marched through our halls with their little masks on, most of the time. Joseph occasionally dealt with a bit of extra noise net to his office. We lovingly called the little group, our 'pod.' We got to know the kids' names and faces. For a short time, we tried to offer compassion in a way that helped the kids feel whole and normal, that helped them grasp a piece of abundant life when almost everything else was topsy-turvy. That could have been the end. But each year since, one of the moms of the students contacts me and asks if her son can help with a mission project around the church. One year, he and all the kids from the pod came to donate to the Mitten Tree and celebrated being back in this special space. This year, he came to sort food donations in the stock we keep for our Little Free Pantry. The fruits of the compassion we tried to show are growing into signs of abundant life, maybe even resurrection life. That child is growing up knowing that life is more than receiving, it is about giving; it is about helping other people to be whole, too.

As we each think about how to contribute to the church financially in the coming year, we can consider how our gifts may be signs of abundant life. One thing our gifts do, is they all join together to offer compassion to hurting people - both our own members and people we don't know well at all. By the love of God working through us, that compassion nudges people toward abundant life. By the grace of Christ among us, some people may be able to arise, and to grasp a glimmer of resurrection. Like the jeweler restoring a few charred rings, on our own we cannot fix all the problems our neighbors experience. But the compassion we show may point our neighbors toward hope. We may help heal some small things, so that God can take that opening, and do even bigger things.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

1 Juliana Kim, "Maui wildfires ruined personal treasures. A local jeweler is repairing items for free," December 30, 2023, NPR, <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/30/1220096055/maui-wildfires-ruined-personal-treasures-a-local-jeweler-is-repairing-items-for->

2 William Placher, *Mark* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) 85.

February 4, 2024

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

"Compassion that Leads to Abundance"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Mark 5:21-43

After the wildfire in Maui last year, many families returned to the sites of their homes to find nothing left. The fires had destroyed just about everything. One of the few items that residents can sometimes locate are pieces of jewelry—tarnished, covered in char, but not completely gone. Shelly Romo didn't expect to find anything when she returned to her neighborhood, wearing a hazmat suit and goggles.¹ But after three hours of sifting the debris, she saw the glint of the diamond from her wedding ring. The stone sparkled as if nothing had happened, even though the band was blackened. Michelle Quirk visited the site of her home on multiple occasions, each time wielding a shovel, determined to find her family's heirlooms. After a hard search, she found several of grandmother's and great-grandmother's rings, which she had always planned to pass down to her children.

When Romo and Quirk found their items, their next stop was No Ka 'O'i Jeweler. The owner of the shop, Omi Chamdi, is a longtime resident of Maui. His home and his shop were blessedly spared by the fires. But as he looked out at the damage and suffering in his community, and he wondered how he could help. Chamdi was a jeweler, and so he decided to put his skills to work to serve his neighbors. He would offer jewelry restoration. In the face of so much loss of life and homes, restoring a ring or a necklace might sound silly. But because pieces of jewelry are sometimes the only remaining items found in the ruins of people's homes, his service has turned out to be an immense gift. Chamdi takes in those charred rings and restores them to beauty. He has borne the full cost of the restorations, which can be pricey, all on his own. The process involves polishing, lasering, soldering, and rhodium plating. So far he has restored 150 pieces, with 300 more in the works. When Romo received her restored ring back from Chamdi, she saw an item that symbolized the life she had built with her family, together. Quirk sees her restored rings as a sign of hope. Before finding them and getting them restored, she could hardly

even talk about the fire and what had happened. Seeing her rings restored she says, “‘It[s] like, through all this, there are still blessings.”

Chamdi the jeweler is offering compassion to his community. The word compassion comes from a root meaning *to suffer with, to suffer together*. Through his gift of restoring jewelry piece by piece, Chamdi is suffering together with his community. Not just by absorbing the financial cost. But more so, by hearing the stories, seeing the pain of people who bring their rings and bracelets to his shop. Through that sharing and togetherness, a kind of reconnection and healing emerges for all of them. A little bit of salvation. It doesn’t change what happened, or brings back what was lost. But there is a glimmer of abundant life in each restored ring.

Compassion is written all over our stories today. It’s compassion that results in abundant life for both of the women who were healed. But just like our story last week about the man afflicted by demons, Jesus’ actions surprise us. The way he offers healing, and what it means, looks different than we expect.

We hear first about the girl’s father, Jairus. He was a religious leader and though many were turning against Jesus, he seemed to believe that Jesus could help his ailing daughter. He was desperate, probably willing to ask anyone who could possibly help to intervene. Jesus heard the request and heeded it. But on the way to Jairus’ house, a huge crowd pushed in on Jesus, slowing his progress toward the ailing girl.

While Jesus was on the way, Mark interrupts that story to tell us about a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years; the whole length of the girl’s life. For better or worse, the Jewish religious tradition in that time asked women who were bleeding to remain in private; not to touch others; to stay home and mostly away from others. This was part of the cultural and religious practice. This set-apartness, this ritual of purity and impurity was intended to be temporary. For many women, this time happened monthly, unless they were pregnant, or elderly, or perhaps nursing a child, when it would be much more rare. Yet this woman had been living her whole life separately, alone, miserable, for twelve full years. The entire life of the younger girl’s life.

For this woman leaving her house and joining the crowd of people around Jesus would have been frowned upon; not allowed by her community. But this woman was done with suffering; she could not go on living this way. In Jesus’ passing by, she saw a chance. She believed that just the touch of Jesus’ cloak would be enough to make her well. So she threw caution to the wind and reached for him. When her fingers brushed his cloak, she got the response she longed for. That small touch of Jesus’ clothes did heal her. She knew it at once. And Jesus did, too, somehow sensing that healing,

saving love, going out from him. Though he didn’t know who it was who’d received it. When she fessed up, Jesus affirmed the woman for taking the chance, for flouting the rules in order to be saved. And he blessed her.

It’s a wonderful account. And yet, when Jesus stopped to talk with the woman, he delayed in getting to Jairus’ house. He waited too long to arrive, and so the little girl died. Despite Jesus’ words about her sleeping, we have to take seriously that she was dead, in order to take seriously the compassion Jesus showed for her. It’s hard for us to understand what happened next. And there was some sense that what Jesus went to do, was not for everyone’s eyes, just his inner circle and the girl’s. When he got to her bedside, he told the girl, “arise.” And she did—alive again, eating, playing, walking.

Jesus’ compassion healed two very different people. One recipient was passive, except for a father who begged for help to save her. One recipient stood up for herself, quietly but assertively claspng hold of the healing she needed. Jesus offered healing in two ways, too: passively to the woman and actively to the girl. For both women, for both instances of compassion, the event was not just about health or bodies. For both, it was about being raised to a new kind of life. A life of abundance, wholeness. Remember, these two stories, sandwiched together, interpret each other. The words used to describe the healing of the girl were *arise, get up*. Those are not just words about movement. Those are words about resurrection, about being raised and restored to something new, something holy. As commentator William Placher writes, “The woman can now go to the temple and associate in a normal way with her neighbors—she can be part of the Jewish people. This is her salvation. The girl will presumably live to adulthood in the ordinary way and then die a normal death. But the terms used hint that in the midst of regular life, this girl is already somehow participating in that new kind of life that will be made known in Jesus’ resurrection.”²

In this story we see that Jesus’ compassion simply overflows. It comes to those who trust in it, who are seeking it, even when he isn’t aware. He offers gifts of healing, resurrection, and salvation. He enters the pain and suffering people are facing, in order to help them embrace an abundant life. Many of us may need that reminder today. A reminder that Christ’s compassion is available, both to those who come seeking or even demanding it. And that it can come even, perhaps, to those who have no way to ask for it or no idea of what they need.

There is also an invitation here for us to offer Christ’s compassion to our neighbors. You and I cannot offer resurrection to those we know are suffering. That is a gift reserved for Jesus alone to give. But we can offer compassion, empathy. Even when it’s hard to do, we can refuse to shut