

Jesus Heals a Centurion's Servant

7 After Jesus^[a] had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ²A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. ³When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. ⁴When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, ⁵for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." ⁶And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; ⁷therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." ⁹When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." ¹⁰When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

Jesus Raises the Widow's Son at Nain

¹¹Soon afterwards^[b] he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. ¹²As 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. ¹³When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." ¹⁴Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!"¹⁵The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus^[c] gave him to his mother. ¹⁶Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" ¹⁷This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

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“Mostly Dead”

Luke 7: 1-17

In “The Princess Bride,” which happens to be one of my favorite movies of all time, Miracle Max, played by Billy Crystal, is examining Wesley who’s been brought to him to be revived from the dead. Not really wanting to perform a miracle, he says to Wesley’s friend, Inigo, “He probably owes you money, huh? I’ll ask him.” Inigo responds, “He’s dead. He can’t talk.” To which Miracle Max replies, “Look who knows so much. It just so happens that your friend here is only MOSTLY dead. There’s a big difference between mostly dead and all dead. Mostly dead is slightly alive. With all dead, well, with all dead there’s only one thing you can do.” And “what’s that?” Inigo asks. “Go through his clothes and look for loose change.”

That’s the scene that kept running through my mind when I was reading these two stories of Jesus’ miracles. Are the Centurion’s slave and the widow’s son ALL dead, or just MOSTLY dead? Did the Centurion really love his servant, or just convince Jesus to heal him so he could do more work? Did Jesus have pity on the widow’s social situation with no man left to care for her, or did he see that her heart had been shattered into a million pieces at the loss of her son? Why these miracles, and not others? Were there times when Jesus said, “No?” Now, in the case of Miracle Max, Max was motivated to come to Wesley’s aid when he found out it promised revenge on his nemesis the King. He also was glad that he would turn a small profit and appease his wife who wanted him to do it for the sake of true love. So what was Jesus’ motivation to perform these two particular healings?

Those are all questions for which the answers are not forthcoming. We don't have the medical reports from that day to determine what each of them suffered in order to determine how they might have been spared or somehow mistaken for all dead. We don't know what kind of healer Jesus was. Did he have unusual medical knowledge? Did he petition God and then have his requests immediately granted? And I'm struck by the detail to which the gospel writers go to situate these astonishing stories of those Jesus brought back from the brink of death to a particular time, and place, and person. There are a few texts that just say that Jesus was out healing random sick people, but these stories are told in sufficient detail to have you imagine exactly what was going on that pulled at his heartstrings so much so that he would offer them a second chance at life.

What exactly made him do it, we don't know. Was it the depth of Jesus' compassion? Was it a means for Jesus to demonstrate his power? Was it that Jesus was a sucker for hard luck situations that came to him clamoring for his help? It's funny to me that now when we talk about proving to others that Jesus is the one who can offer humankind salvation, we talk about how unique it was that God raised him, his son, from the dead. Jesus died for us, not mostly dead, he was ALL dead. And then Jesus rose for us; hallelujah, it's a miracle! But you don't have to read all that far in scripture to find these stories of, shall we say, more ordinary resurrections.

So if you believe something to be true about these stories, is it that Jesus had the power to raise the actually dead, or just the mostly dead? Our modern sensibilities bristle at the notion of bringing the completely dead back to life – though we're pretty OK with bringing the “mostly dead” back to life. It happens in emergency situations and on operating tables with some frequency. ER doctors whose egos are knitted tightly to the number of lives saved would probably say the same thing as Miracle Max – “Mostly dead is slightly alive.” And you can work

with slightly alive. In fact, we've become so good at it that we've begun to wonder when it crosses a line. Families can have excruciating decisions to make about ventilators, and feeding tubes, and multiple kinds of artificial life support. We talk more now about quality of life for those "end of life" situations. None of us wants to linger very long in the state of being "mostly dead." And yet, we find some comfort, I think in knowing that Jesus also takes "end of life" situations quite seriously.

Indeed these stories are a bit unreal to us. So what do they aim to tell us about divine power and intervention? The one thing I clearly gain from these texts is that God is moved by our human grief. God in Christ particularly understands human suffering and has deep compassion that moves him toward action to relieve our pain. Nevertheless, he does not, or cannot, or maybe will not change the nature of human history. He does not, by healing them, make them immortal or immune to future suffering. The Centurion's servant and the widow's son are not still with us. After this encounter they will die – all over again. But something about that particular time and that particular encounter with holiness made them different.

That's what baffles me so. If God cares so much, why are these healings seemingly so random, and yet talked about as so very particular? Why did Jesus come across *that* Centurion, and *that* grieving mother? For the Centurion, it seemed to be his humility, his utter lack of ego that moved Jesus to pity. His role as a soldier and enforcer of the rules might have given him the expectation that Jesus owed him one. And yet, he comes to Jesus almost groveling. Please, please heal my servant. He deserves it. He loves our people. He helped build the synagogue. This slave is worthy of special treatment, his master says. The Centurion even appealed to Jesus' authority as greater than his own. You say the word, Jesus, and he will be healed. For this story to continue to be told about the Centurion's faith in Christ as the healer, in God as the one who

can truly intervene, is an interesting choice. It displaces the power structures of the day to show how Jesus, a rabbinical holy man, not particularly admired by the Roman occupiers of his society could have pity and compassion for this soldier who had a bond with his servant. Maybe this was the “right” healing to show Christ’s authority as different from the world’s power.

And for the widow? She was a victim of the prevailing culture of her time. With no husband and no son to care for her, she would certainly end up impoverished, possibly far worse. The Centurion had power and relinquished it to Jesus. She had no power and no authority, but her tears were motivation enough for Jesus to come to her assistance. In the first story, the slave could be read as only mostly dead and Jesus made him well again, but in this story, this son is being carried on his funeral mat. We presume he is all dead. The mourners tell the tale. And Jesus, healer and prophet redeems this situation from causing more pain and trauma in an already difficult situation. In this case, he’s not helping someone important who will go and tell the story, he intervenes precisely where the participants would otherwise have no voice at all.

So are these stories particular to times and places and persons? Yes, they are. But in Luke’s text they most certainly are NOT random occurrences. In Luke’s gospel, the stories are not only miraculous tales of healing and resurrection; they are indicators of exactly how Jesus has come to show God’s presence in the world. Jesus honors the humble request of the powerful, and addresses the powerlessness of the world’s most forgotten. Jesus, with these ordinary resurrections paves the way for his own extraordinary resurrection that is designed to upend the power structures that threaten lives in our world each and every day. Luke’s telling leaves us with the hope that mercy and miracles are indeed possible in our unjust world.

We can make the mistake with these texts to think that an unquestioned faith is what Jesus expects to grant healing, or that good people don't deserve to die, or that all the tears of every wounded mother will be wiped away because dead sons and daughters are promised new life in heaven. Those unhelpful threads can be pulled from these texts, especially if the two stories are split apart and read separately, which is what the lectionary does to them. But read together, the scandalous nature of the telling of these stories comes into an even clearer focus. Resurrection, in the everyday sort of way, is a promise that death is not the final word, and our culture's attempt to make it so, is not what's really real. What Jesus offers is what's really real. He has come to bring the powerful down from their thrones and to lift up the powerless. An echo of the Magnificat resonates clearly through these two stories of how God, in Christ, heals us and makes us whole. It's not just about the compassion Jesus has for certain individuals, which he does have. It's about the compassion Jesus has for the whole world, and the healings of the slave and the son are just examples of what that his compassion is truly all about. Amen.