

Imagine with me that you are a widow with a young son. You are the sole source of support for your family. There is no social safety net other than a male relative and your only job options are as a wife and mother. There is no male relative to look after you. You and your son are nearing starvation and you are scavenging for whatever resources you can find. You live in the only part of town you can afford, next to the swamp and near the town's gate.

Now imagine with me that you are a top advisor to your political leaders. You have just given these political leaders really, really bad news: God is going to punish these leaders and those they lead with a severe drought because they have been worshipping a false god whose chief ability is allegedly to supply the rain. These political leaders don't like the message that you bring and are prepared to kill the messenger. God tells you that you must get out of town, quickly and sends you into the heart of the land where the false god and those who follow the false god live ... which happens to be in the swamp.

You are well hidden in the swamp for an extended period of time. Birds of prey, sent by God, feed you. Eventually, though, the extended drought dries up even the swamp and the birds are no longer bringing you

food, much less something to drink. You stink like a swamp, you haven't shaved in weeks, your hair is matted and unkempt, you're very hungry and thirsty as well as starved for human companionship. As far as you know, it is still unsafe for you to venture outside of the former swamp. These circumstances lead you to have a wild look in your eyes. Frankly, you no longer look like a respected advisor who might work on K Street in Washington, D.C.; you look more like someone who is deranged.

You have a message from God to approach the widow, who has been commanded to feed you. You regard her from your hiding spot. You notice that she is gaunt from malnutrition and you wonder how on earth she has the resources to take care of him when she clearly can't take care of herself. You call out to her, asking for a little water.

She regards you and you can see the pity and the fear in her eyes at the same time. She moves to fetch the water and you call out to her, "and while your going for the water, please bring me some bread!" She objects, saying she just has enough for a last meal for herself and her son. You reassure her however, that she will have enough flour and oil and water for the duration of the drought and amazingly she believes you. In no time at all, she finds you are as good as your word. You move in as her lodger and

all seems to be going well until one day, for no apparent reason, the widow's little boy dies.

The widow understands that you and God are close, so close that you are actually God's prophet. As such, she worries that your relationship with God has brought her to God's attention in a negative way. She, who has only shown you hospitality, is being punished in the most terrible way imaginable. You in your great compassion for the mother's anguish, do something about it - with God's help, the little boy is revived and you bring her back to his mother and say "See, your son is alive." And at this second, life giving miracle, the widow acknowledges that you, Elijah, speak on God's behalf and that you follow the one, true God.

Notice in this story, that the widow and her son are so at the margins of their society that they don't even have names. Even so, when the little boy dies, Elijah covered the boy with his own body - powerful symbolism that God cares for the whole person. Each of the characters in this story are marginalized to one degree or another, Elijah is a stranger, equivalent to a political refugee, and the widow and her child - considered an orphan as he lacks a father, are at the very edges of their society. Human systems oppress and marginalize them. Yet God is also present in this story. Elijah,

as God's agent, is life giving not just once in restoring the boy to life and thus ensuring his mother's future well-being but twice, when the food supply never ran out, keeping starvation at bay. What does this tell us about God? Perhaps the message in psalm 146 says it best: God directs God's life giving work to support society's victims.

In today's gospel, Luke counts on us to know this story from First Kings. So that we don't miss the allusion, Jesus "gives the young man to his mother," just as Elijah "gives the little boy to his mother," Luke takes this as a direct quote from First Kings. While Luke is invoking Elijah in this scene, he is also comparing and contrasting Jesus to Elijah. Elijah has to lay on the boy to revive him, Jesus merely has to say the word and the young man is revived. The widow has to implore Elijah, Jesus simply observes and notices the widow, she doesn't say a word to Jesus and maybe didn't even see him herself, until Jesus spoke to her.

Like wants us to see that Jesus is a healer and a prophet and that he is a greater prophet than Elijah; in fact, he is the ultimate prophet, the prophet that will usher in the end of days and the Kingdom of God at the same time. Additionally, Luke wants us to see how Jesus was moved by compassion for the widow, and that compassion and mercy are part of

God's character. God in Jesus is deeply concerned about our suffering - it's difficult imagining more suffering than the suffering a parent has at the loss of a child. And in a lovely metaphor, we see that Jesus meets us at the intersection of life and death - that he and his followers met the funeral procession, and in reviving the young man, reveals what happens when new life transforms mortal existence.

We, as heirs to new life and in response to this incredible gift, seek to emulate Jesus in his compassion for all of us. In a way, we tried to emulate this compassion in our parish meeting last Wednesday. Our facilitated conversations made sure that space was created so that all had an opportunity to speak and everyone had the chance to be heard. Knowing that our concerns are heard, acknowledged and understood is a tremendous gift. I've had similar experiences with this type of conversation before. Three times a year, for five years, I met with a variety of leaders from around the Diocese of Virginia to discuss human sexuality in facilitated discussions. This leadership group never came to an agreement, yet the process of being in dialogue formed us into being a community of friends, united at the Lord's table. Over the course of those

five years, we each learned how to listen to one another compassionately, even though we profoundly disagreed.

My hope is that when we as a parish family or as a Christian community believe very strongly in something, that we will engage in deliberate and thoughtful conversation. We will attempt to place ourselves in the other's shoes and see the matter from the other's point-of-view. We will give the gift of our full attention and let the other know he or she is heard and valued. We keep open the possibility that we might be wrong.

We will give this gift to our leadership as well, whether it is the vestry or clergy. You may know that bishops, at their consecration vow to "boldly proclaim and interpret the Gospel of Christ, enlightening the minds and stirring up [our] conscience." [BCP, 518.] Our bishop is doing just that when she encourages us to look at how many die or are injured by gun fire. Whether you agree or not, if this is an issue that moves you, I hope you will find others who are also passionately interested and engage in a thoughtful dialogue. Perhaps by engaging compassionately, we change the tone of the conversation in the public square and give the Holy Spirit room to make God's will known. Perhaps in this small way, we also reduce some of the

pain and suffering in this world and provide the world another glimpse of God's Kingdom.

AMEN.