
Into the Magic Shop

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Proper 5 – Year C

“And when the Lord saw her he, had compassion upon her.”

Make me chaste, but not yet.

This is what his prayer sounded like. It’s as if he said, “I want to pick up what you’re laying down, Lord, but not today.”

These are the words of Augustine, the famous 4th century bishop in North Africa. Augustine was intrigued by the Christian faith. He admired the martyrs and the monks that he saw.

But Augustine had a problem. You see, Augustine had a very, very, very exciting social life, and he was not eager to give it up. Looking back on this time in his life he said, “It was as if all of my prayers were, ‘Lord, Lord make me chaste, but not yet.’”

Then one day in August sitting in a garden in his home city, he heard a child’s voice chanting. “Take it and read,” he heard. “Take it and read.”

He reached down, grabbed the Bible that was sitting in front of him, opened it without thinking, and read the very first words that his eyes fell upon. They were from Paul’s letter to the Romans and they went like this:

“Not in reveling or drunkenness, not in debauchery or licentiousness, not in quarreling or jealousy, instead put on Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires.”

Augustine did not need to read any further. He saw the light. He had confidence in himself. He knew what to do. All of his doubts drained away.

He realized that he had not been struggling with his faith, as much as he had been resisting faith. He was not having a problem as much as he simply didn’t want to be a Christian, did not want to observe the disciplines of the faith.

He didn’t call upon God; God called upon him. It wasn’t because he merited this grace; it was because God loved him. It was because Augustine was suffering. This is how God works.

And we get a sense of why God works this way in the story of Jesus’ healing the widow’s son.

Interestingly Jesus is not the first one to raise a widow’s son from the dead. Other prophets had done that. Elijah had raised the widow’s son from the dead by laying on him. His student Elisha did much the same thing touching a widow’s son, telling him to come back to life.

In each case the prophet was rewarding the relationship with the widow, was repaying generosity given by the widow, was responding to the widow’s request. Not so with Jesus. Jesus simply happens upon a funeral procession. It’s not clear to me that the widow even knew he was there. We don’t hear about her looking at him, summoning him, asking anything from

him. He just sees her and her suffering, has compassion for her, and responds.

You see she is not just lost a part of herself. It is not just the pain of her only son's death. She lived in a time where women could not really support themselves. Her husband is dead, now her son is dead. She is vulnerable in more than one way. It is not at all clear how she can even support herself.

Jesus is moved. Jesus is moved by her suffering and, mind you, it's not that Jesus had compassion on her—did nice things—it is that Jesus had compassion *for* her, felt her pain, had an empathetic response, moved in response to his feeling. This is what Jesus sees and he has moved by it.

This is also, interestingly, the very first time that Jesus is called Lord in the Gospel of Luke, as if Luke is telling us “This is what it means to be Lord. The Lord is one who is moved by the suffering of others. The Lord is the one who feels compassion for them. The Lord is the one who acts out of that compassion.”

So what does all this mean for us? If this is how God works, offering us life regardless of what we deserve, and if this is why God works this way, to alleviate our suffering, what does that mean for us?

I think we are seeing a pattern. I think we are seeing the way God acts in the world and if we can come to recognize this pattern in Scripture, then we will be able to see this pattern in the rest of our life. If we learn to recognize it, then we will know how to identify it, live into it, participate in it, find new life.

Let me give you a more contemporary example. I recently read a book titled, *Into the Magic Shop* by Dr. James R. Doty. Doty is a professor of Neuroscience at Stanford University. He has his own foundation in which he does research on compassion and altruism. He knows the Dalai Lama personally. He is on many nonprofit boards. He is by all accounts a stunning success.

It didn't start out that way though. Doty grew up poor, in poverty, in the high desert of California. His father was an alcoholic, frequently unemployed. His mother had suffered a stroke, lived with chronic depression, and was suicidal much of the time. He didn't know where the rent would come from. He was insecure. He was vulnerable. He was alone.

One day when he was 12 years old he rode his bike to the magic shop. You see Doty had one abiding interest. He loved tricks. And he performed them so often that he'd actually worn through his plastic thumb. You know about the plastic thumb, right? It's what magicians use to hide those things that come out behind the veil.

He walked into the magic shop there was a woman behind the counter. It was 1968 she was probably wearing a tie-dye t-shirt or something. It turns out though that she didn't know anything about magic. She'd never heard of a plastic thumb. She was just visiting. Her son owned the magic shop. But she did know about people, and she did recognize something in him. She recognized his suffering. She recognized his loneliness.

And so, after he had browsed through the shop, she invited him to come back, and over the next several weeks, she taught him how to meditate, how to visualize, how to engage in what we would now call mindfulness and visualization. And he used it the way we would normally use magic.

He began to visualize the good things that he needed: rent, a job for his father, getting into college, getting into medical school, wealth, fame, achievement. And it seemed to work.

He learned how to still himself, apply himself, and it worked... for a while. And then one day, just after the dot-com crash, Doty found himself all but penniless. His stock portfolio had crashed. His startup company was unable to fund itself. He had almost no money left.

But there was a trust – a trust in which he had left 35 million dollars to charity. In his grief, he went back to the high desert of California, began searching for the magic shop, looking for this woman, Ruth, trying to discern how this magic would get him out of this situation.

While he was there, he reviewed notes that he had made years before. And he saw in those notes something that he did not remember. It was from a day when he had been late. Something had happened. She didn't know what it was, but she knew that he was upset and she said, “Do you know what a compass is?”

“Yes,” he said, “It gives you direction.”

She said, “Your heart is your compass. When your heart breaks, when it is wounded, that’s when you can change. That’s when new things are let in. Follow your heart and you will find your future. Follow your heart and you will learn that what you wanted is not what you need.

The next day, as he was sitting on a hotel room bed, the phone rang. It was his New York lawyer. “Good news,” the lawyer said, “You never signed the trust document. You never funded your trust. You don’t have to give that money away. You now have 35 million dollars of your own.”

Doty said, “Thank you,” started to hang up the phone and the lawyer said, “Well what do you want me to do?

And Doty said, “I’ll be back in New York tomorrow to sign the trust document. That money is for charity. That’s where it will go.”

Now I don’t want to make too much out of this; he was still a neurosurgeon. And yet somehow he was changed. He was different. He had connected his head with his heart. He had learned that the mind—that which dissects and analyzes and separates—must be connected to the heart—that which is relational and combining, that which feels, that which has compassion.

And in his compassion, he made a different decision. In his compassion he recognized the suffering of others and he acted and he has continued to act ever since, studying mindfulness and compassion and altruism as a scientific matter, learning how to connect head and heart for all, learning that the best decisions are in fact made when your head and your heart are integrated.

This is the pattern. This is the pattern of God’s activity. This is the way God acts in the world and this is why God acts in the world: to alleviate suffering. To call Jesus Lord is to see the suffering in front of us, to feel it in our guts and to respond. To call Jesus Lord, to live a Christian life, is in fact to be chaste, but also to be in relationship with those we know and those we don’t. To call Jesus Lord is to move toward the suffering, to give our hearts to the suffering, to hold and comfort and help those who are suffering.

Amen.