

Speaker: A reading from the gospel according to St. Luke Soon afterward Jesus went to a city called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. As he drew near to the gate of the city behold, a man who had died was being carried out. The only son of his mother and she was a widow. And the large crowd from the city was with her. And when the Lord saw her he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." And he came and touched the bier and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and he gave him to his mother. Fear seized them all and they glorified God saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has visited his people!" And this report concerning him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country. This is the word of the Lord. There is a story in Buddhist tradition about a meeting that is suppose to have taken place one day between the Buddha himself and an odd little creature, known as the Monkey God. After the fashion of most monkeys, he was apparently impudent, ingenuous and rather ludicrous but above all he was very vain and very boastful. These qualities become apparent as soon as he and the Buddha came face to face because the very first thing he tries to do, is to prove that he, the Monkey God is just as powerful as the great Buddha himself if not indeed more so. In order to demonstrate this, he sets about performing a number of rather astonishing tricks. The kind you might expect from a monkey under the circumstances. And all the while he's performing them, the Buddha sits there politely attentive but giving no particular sign of being impressed. Finally, when he's plainly at his wits end, the Monkey God pulls out his best act. Which consists of taking one enormously leap into the air and disappearing from sight completely. He is gone for 5 minutes or 5 centuries, no one seems to know for sure. But eventually he comes back and stands around, waiting for the Buddha to ask him about his venture. But the Buddha says nothing at all. The Monkey God can't stand the silence any longer so he tells him anyway, explaining that he's just come back from the outer most limits of the Universe. And that perhaps, this is a journey that even the Buddha might find reason to admire. Then he stands around for a little while longer, hoping that this time the Buddha will ask him what he saw there. Again, there is no sound except for the sound of his own heart pounding. And again, he is forced to answer the question that has not been asked. He explains in detail how when he reached the outer most limits of the Universe, he saw there 5 huge granite pillars, which extended up and up and up until the tops of them were lost in the clouds. And what does the Buddha think of that he asks, looking up into the Buddhas great silent face. And this time the Buddha does answer but not in words. Instead of saying anything, the Buddha simply raises his hand and holds it up there before the Monkey God's eyes. As the Monkey God looks at it, his attention is drawn to the Buddhas fingers and as he gazes at them, he sees them not as fingers but as 5 huge granite pillars which extend up and up and up until the tops of them are lost in the clouds. I'm grateful to Frederick Bikaner for recounting this story in one of his sermons. For it seems to me to exemplify one of the great dilemmas that we face in the church. We preachers can spend inordinate amounts of energy doing all sorts of verbal contortions in an attempt to describe God. When what we really need to do is to point toward the reality of God's presence in your life and mine. Words were invented to deal with the world of time and space. Where as by definition, God exists beyond such categories all together. And so, in our attempt to talk about God we sometimes mix up the truth about the reality of God's presence. With their own notions of what it is that God ought to be about. This is especially the case when we bump up against some part of

God's character that seems especially difficult to understand. For an instance, you may have heard someone proclaim that "God helps those who help themselves." Perhaps you, yourself have vouch for the truth of this statement, declaring that the bible tells you so. But in fact, the bible says something quite the opposite. Namely, that God raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, making them sit with nobles, as we read in today's Psalm. As the bible tells it, God is a compassionate God who helps those who either can't help themselves or for whatever reason have chosen not to do so. This became perfectly clear in God's self revelation through Jesus Christ. The tough thing though is that even when we say that, we haven't grasp the full meaning of this reality. For words can not contain it. Only by pointing to the experience of another and hopefully, someday having that experience for ourselves do we begin to know the full measure of God's mercy. Seen in that light our gospel lesson provides us with the powerful revelation of God's character. Which is easier to point to than to describe. There we find Jesus and his disciples as they draw near to the gate of the city of Nain, where they meet a funeral procession. Which was leaving the city to bury a dead man. The man who had died was the only son of his mother. They soon learned and she was a widow. Undoubtedly, hers is a hard life already. Due to the inferior position granted to widows in those days. In Hebrew law, she had absolutely no rights of inheritance. This strange neglect may have been due to the fact that the Hebrews believed that death before old age was a judgment for sin. Which was extended to the wife that was left. Widow in Hebrew, resembles the word meaning "be mute". Suggesting the muteness induced by a so called "disgraceful widowhood". In the case of this particular widow, her plight was even more tragic as this was her only son who had died. Bereft of both men in her life, she is without identity, security or companionship. Thus Jesus looked upon her and all of her sadness, her despair, her hopelessness and was moved to have compassion on her. This may sound like a common response to us. Wouldn't any of us be moved to compassion? But a careful look at this text reveals the depth of this divine compassion. The Greek word for compassion used only in reference to Jesus or the Father, refers to the entrails of the body or as we might say the guts. When we say Jesus was moved to feel compassion for this widow, in his gut, this is obviously something quite different from passing feelings of sorrow or of sympathy. Rather it extended to the most vulnerable part of his being. It is related to the Hebrew word for compassion, which refers to the womb of Yahweh. When Jesus was moved to compassion, we can say that the womb of Yahweh trembled. This word reminds us that the source of all life remains connected to the creation which he, perhaps better referred to as she, in this instance, gives birth to. Much like a mother as forever bonded to her child but even more so. As the prophet Isaiah writes, "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. I have carved you on the palm of my hand." says the Lord. This depth of feeling was revealed time and time again in scriptures as Jesus ministered to his people when he saw the crowd harassed and dejected like sheep without a shepherd. When he saw the blind, the deaf, the paralyzed being brought to him. When he noticed that the thousands who followed him were tired and hungry. Through Christ, it became clear that God has established solidarity with us whatever our predicament. We know that God has embraced everything human with infinite tenderness including our pain and grief. Well, this is certainly all good to know about you may be thinking. But why all this emphasis on Christ suffering with us? The widow's son was brought back to life, wasn't he? Isn't it the cure that really counts? Isn't that that proof of God's love towards us? Beware the limitations such a pragmatic view imposes on this story. Yes, Jesus did bring new life to those he met but it was out of his great compassion that such feeling and healing emerged. He did not cure to prove

or to impress or to convince. Jesus' cure was the natural expression of his being our God. We know too well how hollow a cure can seem when performed without compassion. We all know of men and women who could walk again, see again or speak again but whose hearts remained dark and embittered. A genuine cure occurs most readily in a genuinely caring atmosphere. Otherwise, the attempt to provide a cure degenerates into manipulation or condescension. And so the truly good news is that our God is not a distant God to be avoided or feared but one who freely participates in the fullness of human struggle. We're not alone in our pain and sorrow. God truly cares for us. Simple as that may sound, it remains difficult to comprehend. We live in a world where the concept of caring becomes more and more ambiguous it seems. Even our language reflects a certain ambivalence toward the word care. "I would take care of him." is just likely to imply a threat, as a promise to show compassion. "I don't care." is a common place response to many choices in life, not least among them being religion. A carefree lifestyle is more attractive to most than a careful one. Genuine care is not ambiguous however. Real care excludes a difference and is the opposite of apathy. The word "care" finds its roots in the Gothic word "lament". The basic meaning of care is therefore "to grieve", "to experience sorrow", "to cry out with". This is especially interesting when you consider that we most often interpret care as an attitude of the strong toward the weak or of the powerful toward the powerless. And in fact, we feel quite uncomfortable with the idea of being with someone in pain, when that's all that we can do. What was your reaction the last time someone asked you to visit a dying friend or a family in mourning? In a provocative article of Dr. Thomas Long of Princeton Theological Seminary, who is a favorite guest preacher of ours here at the chapel. He proposes that our death denying culture has found more and more and more ways to remove ourselves from a process of caring for one another in times of grief. He comments on the way that just a couple of generations ago in the rural south, the community played a much larger role in the period of time immediately following a death. Plates of food were brought to the bereaved family so many that they had to be identified by names written on pieces of little adhesive tapes stuck to the bottom of the plate. The women were charge with the responsibility of washing and preparing the body for burial and the men would make the coffin. Members of the family often with friends, would sit up with the body the night before the funeral. After the burial, there would be an extended season of memorializing, when family and friends would gather for visiting and storytelling. These days seems we do well to find the time to send a sympathy card. Or to take the day off work for the funeral. Thank goodness we have the option of paying for the funeral director to make the necessary arrangements. All the way from preparing the body to providing transportation, we can be sure he will offer it with a smile. But this seems somehow in marked contrast to the early Christian notion that the rituals surrounding the death of a Christian belongs specifically to their own community. Enabling them to care for one another in their time of need. Whereas the Romans avoided touching the body, Christians gave their dead the kiss of peace. Among the Romans, the task of laying out the body was a chore given to a slave. Among Christians, it was a work of love carried out by family and friends. The Romans process to the graveyard to the sound of trumpets and lutes. The Christians to the chanting of songs. An impoverished Roman who died was buried unceremonially on a common burying ground. Christians raised endowments for the burial of their poor. There's a sense on which all of these actions constituted a frame work of caring within the Christian community. A liturgical act and the best sense of the word which enabled them to act out their beliefs. Don't worry, I'm not proposing that we even attempt to go back to building our own coffins or preparing the bodies ourselves for burial. That's not likely to be a very popular suggestion in anybodies church. I'm simply saying that the challenge we do face as a Christian community is how to reclaim the call of Christ. Being compassionate as your father

is compassionate. When we know the depth of caring, those words require of us. In a world that computes time as money it seems to be coming increasingly difficult to give of our time to one another and therefore of ourselves. It seems so much easier simply to pay to have it done for us. Meanwhile, we forego much of the joy that true caring brings to living and that Christian community is all about. It was the bereaved widow's extremely good fortune that she should encountered Jesus just at the time she did outside the city gate. No amount of money could've paid for the care he was about to provide her. "Do not weep" he said. As he gave her one of the greatest gifts a person could ever hope to receive. The gift of unspeakable joy, which accompanies the return of life where there was death. We've been privileged to know that feeling too but perhaps, without realizing where it came from such as the time a love one suddenly recovers after a life threatening illness, such as when we experience forgiveness after being filled with fear and shame, such as when we find ourselves being cared for after feeling lost and alone or in the face of a devastating loss. It is as if God has held up before us not the hand of the Buddha but the figure of a man whose face is marred almost beyond recognition but who can still say to us, "Do not weep, these things have I done for you that my joy may be in you". Thanks be to God.