

June 5, 2016
Third Sunday after Pentecost
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I love my kids. Over the years, they have so amused me by the various things they have done or said. To name one example from several years ago, my older daughter Taylor, was astonished one day to learn that Martin Luther King Jr's "I have a dream" speech was, you know, an actual speech.

I was like, "What?"

She said, "All I ever saw or heard him say was, "I have a dream!", so I thought that was all he said.

Now, I am one who visualizes things. So can you picture all those hundreds of thousands of people who had marched upon Washington D.C. and gathered there, feeling that something major and historic is going to happen that day. And then the great civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr., finally takes the stage, walks up to the podium to address this mighty throng of people on this historic occasion. And then it happens, it finally happens -- "I have a dream!"

And then he walks off.

Amused, I tell you. But once I stepped back and thought about it, I could see how Taylor could draw that conclusion, especially with her still being a kid at the time. Typically, on TV or wherever, you only heard that tiny -- though memorable -- snippet of his speech. Or sometimes you heard a little more, about black and white kids going to school together, or of people being judged by the content of their character on not by the color of their skin.

But as memorable as those phrases and audio snippets are, they cannot possibly capture the full depth of everything Dr. King had to say that day, let alone the hundreds of years of racial cruelty and injustice that brought all those people to Washington that day and inspired their call to action. No one can fully understand unless you went through it.

I bring all this up because it reminds me of our Gospel reading today. It's the familiar story of Jesus resurrecting the only son of a widow in Nain. Many of us have heard of or read the account a number of times -- much like we've heard "I have a dream!" and "Great God almighty, we're free at last." But how many times have we actually put ourselves in that situation described in the Bible. Being a member of that crowd. Or even giving deeper thought to the widow herself.

Here's a woman who likely had very little family. Her husband had died; she was a widow. As far as we know, she had only one son, and that was it. He was the light of her life, the most loved and most important person in this woman's life.

The son, of course, dies. It doesn't say how. Did he pass on after enduring months or even years of illness, or did he die suddenly and without warning, like in a work accident. Either way, the mother went through a tremendous ordeal, through a long, emotionally-wrenching process or the utter shock of having her son fine and healthy one day and gone the next.

How did Jesus react? "When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Remember, Jesus had just arrived in that town of Nain. He was there for the widow's heartbreaking backstory; he was not there when her only son died. In effect, he neither lived through slavery nor segregation, nor did he hear the entire "speech." Jesus' interaction with the widow was so brief, he only got the "I have a dream" snippet of her life.

And yet, Jesus saw her and what was taking place, and he was moved to compassion. From what we can tell, he knew next to nothing about her, yet he felt this great compassion, empathy for this grieving woman upon seeing her. Jesus wanted to help, and boy, did he! He raised her only son, the one remaining light of her life, from the dead.

The formerly dead young man sat up and began to speak, and then Jesus brought him to his mother. Could you imagine the extreme swing of emotions she felt that day? Think of the joy she felt the next day, and the day after that and the day after that.

That part isn't written in the Scriptures, and really, that's how most personal interactions work. We have friends and family members that we are close to and know very well. But many of our encounters with others are like that of Jesus and the widow of Nain. We connect, maybe once with a passing stranger, or more frequently with someone we see here at church or at work or in our neighborhood. We connect for a few seconds or minutes or in a regular but limited way, and then we part ways and get on with our lives.

And that's fine, it's natural. I mean, we cannot build and cultivate an intimate friendship with every single human we ever meet. We would need, like 487 hours in a day to pull that off. It would be great to know everybody's full speech. That would be awesome. But more often than not, all we can realistically handle is "I have a dream."

But there are three takeaways to from this reading that I want to share with you. One -- and this was a consistent theme with all four readings -- God is merciful and He has the power to bring people back to life, one way or another. He did so through first Elijah and then Jesus, interestingly, both raising the only sons of widows, and he prompted a spiritual rebirth in Paul, who transitioned from a vicious persecutor of early Christians to an apostle for the nations. It is great to know we have such a loving and powerful God.

But the second and third points go back to our discussion on Jesus and the widow of Nain and the Martin Luther King speech. It's true that we cannot spend as much time with every person we meet as we do with our closest loved ones, but that doesn't mean we can't reach out and try to get to know some people a little better. Start simple and go from there. It can be a rewarding experience and a natural outpouring of our Christian love.

But the final point is when it's all said and done, most of our interactions with people will be fleeting or limited. But even then, we are called to show compassion to people we hardly know or don't know at all, as Jesus did with this widow. Each person is a child of God and a reflection of Him, and each person has a deeper story than with triumphs and tragedies, more than we can ever know from the brief "I have a dream" snippet we get from them. Obviously we cannot resurrect anyone, but you never know what positive effect a smile, a nice greeting or kind words of encouragement can have on a person at that particular point in time. You never know.

But I can tell you this -- I have received a LOT of greetings and kind words from you here at St. Michael's; you have really shown Christian compassion toward me. I thank you so much; I will not forget it. I ask each of you to keep it up -- continue showing that compassion with everyone who comes through those doors and the people you meet outside of them. That warmth and sense of caring is a big part of what makes St. Michael's such a special place.

Amen.