

Actor Kevin Bacon tells a story on himself. After the release of his movie, *Footloose*, his son came to him and said, "Dad, that movie was awesome! That part where you were swinging from the rafters in that building was so cool! How did you do that?"

"Well, son, that wasn't really me. That was a stunt man."

"What's a stunt man?" his son asked.

"That's a guy who dresses up in my clothes and does stuff I can't do."

"Oh. Well, that part in the gym where you twirled around on that bar and landed on your feet, that was pretty cool. How'd you do that?"

"Uh, well, that wasn't me either. That was a gymnastics double," Bacon said

"What's a gymnastics double?"

"That's a guy who dresses up in my clothes and does stuff I can't do."

"Oh. Well, gee, dad, just what *did* you do in that movie?"

"Well, son," Bacon said sheepishly, "I guess I got all the glory."

What a great picture of grace: God's grace, unearned, undeserved, given to us not because of what we can do or have done but because we need it, and because of who God is, in wanting to give us what we need.

Sometimes, we remember and celebrate that grace, as we do in worship and in our life together as a congregation. Other times that grace comes as a complete surprise, as it came to this woman we've come to know as the Widow of Nain.

In one sense, this is an isolated incident: one woman in one story. But in a larger sense, it's a snapshot of what God is up to, and in that way it very much involves you and me.

We don't know why Jesus came to Nain. But we do know that as he approached the town he encountered a funeral procession. The body of a young man was being carried to a tomb. We don't know how he died, if he'd been ill for some time, or died suddenly. But we do know that his death meant almost certain death for someone else. His mother was a widow; she had no other children, so the death of her son left her with no means of support. Being a widow, she was excluded from the inheritance laws; any valuables owned by her extended family could not pass on to her. So with the death of her son, the rest of her life was liable to be desperate and brief.

Jesus knew all of that, saw it in an instant—and he acted.

A magazine ran a contest to find the best definition of the word "friend." Here's the winner: "A friend is the one who comes in when the whole world's gone out." Do you know the feeling? Something awful has happened, and it seems like everyone's left you high and dry. Then one person steps up.

That's what Jesus did with this widow. The Bible says, "he had compassion." When we think of compassion we tend to think of pity, feeling sorry for people in their distress. But the image of compassion here is deeper, more graphic. It was thought that compassion was a physical function, located in a person's intestines. So when a person felt compassion, he or she would feel an actual, physical pang or wrenching in the intestines. That's what Jesus felt for this widow. It's become trite to say, "I feel your pain," but that's exactly how Scripture conceives of compassion.

So, what about that compassion in this story?

First, Jesus' compassion is focused on widow, not the son. Jesus is so taken by the woman's desperate situation that he, literally, enters into it. He acts immediately to restore the son to life, but he does it not only for the son, but to keep the son's death from causing the suffering and eventual death of the widow. He restores one life to save another.

Second, everything flows from Jesus' compassion. No one asks him to do anything. No one comes up to him and pleads on behalf of the widow. No one says, "She's led a righteous life; she's earned a miracle." In fact, we know nothing about her, what her life's been like, what she's done or failed to do. Jesus simply sees the tragedy of her situation, and acts to bring a bit of God's Kingdom to her.

This story is symbolic, because it looks ahead to Jesus' resurrection. Jesus will be raised from death by God's power, just as this young man has been raised. In fact, the whole point of Jesus' life, death and resurrection is humanity's resurrection, the breaking the power of death that's held humanity captive. That's God's agenda: freeing all creation, including you and me, from the grip of death's power. It is a campaign of pure grace—that's where you and I come in.

Like Jesus, who acts with grace, breaks death's power, and brings forth life, for the Widow of Nain, we're to offer the grace that breaks death's power and bring forth life, here and now. We, as Christ's body, are to have a real impact on our world, to be living reminders that God's hope for all of people, in addition to living eternally with him, is for abundance of life *now*. Philip Spener, said it well: "We're to be different because Christ is in us. The world's to be different because we're in it."

So what might it look like if we were to do something new, "because Christ is in us?" What new life might be brought forth in the world, because we're in it?

It might be anywhere, in all kinds of ways...

- * In the school lunch room, by simply going to sit with the kid who's eating alone.
- * With an employer or coach, by saying, "I worship on Sunday mornings!"
- * By keeping a commitment we've made, even if it means missing out on a "better offer."
- * By expecting our children to be honest and to honor their commitments.

You never know! You never know how daring to do something new "because Christ is in us" might really mean that the world will be a different place, "because we're in it."

The whole nationwide Interfaith Hospitality network grew out of one woman's stopping to share food with some homeless people. After years of deliberating First Methodist Church in Cuyahoga Falls will soon become a host congregation because Rollie Seguin took the time to meet with them.

Thirty years ago, a pastor named Art Simon, serving a church in a poor area of New York, said, "I know my church can do a lot. We can start a food pantry and a clothes closet. But I also know that the federal government, with the stroke of a pen, can release billions to feed the hungry." So he started *Bread for the World*, a Christian organization that challenges governments around the world to change the systems that keep people hungry into ones that help feed them instead.

Individual people, who act differently because they have "Jesus inside," can make the world a different place, can bring a little bit more of the Kingdom of God into reality.

The church offers many opportunities to do that - to act differently because Jesus has gotten inside us. Some special ones are coming up, right here at Bethany, in the next few months. The Stewardship Committee is meeting Tuesday night to think about how all of us can be more mindful of God's abundant blessings and how we might more fully express our gratitude for them; come and share with them. At the end of the month, we'll be hosting guests from the Interfaith Hospitality

Network; more help is always needed. All kinds of helpers are needed for Vacation Bible School in July. Teachers and helpers for Sunday School classes of all ages are needed for the fall. Our children and youth need parents who will get them here regularly for those classes. Adult classes are eager to welcome more of us to share in growing in faith together. The Bethany Buckeyes would love to welcome more of you to share good food, fun, and fellowship with them. The Retreat Committee invites you to set aside October 2nd, as a day to share with your faith family.

No, none of those possibilities sound especially life changing. But they could be! Because they're opportunities to set priorities, witness to values, form habits, build relationships, nurture faith, care for each other, call forth gifts, and inspire growth. They all offer ways to grow as individual disciples and as a faith family, to help us be the church God calls us to be, individually and together, to become different "because Jesus is inside us," and to make the world different "because we're in it."

Bringing forth life, as Jesus did, isn't always as dramatic as in the Bible, or as public as *Bread for the World*. Sometimes, your action, your impact, your difference boils down to one other person.

At a three day denominational gathering, a band played for worship and during the breaks between sessions. Various members of the band would occasionally say a few words of reflection or witness. Except one, the rhythm guitarist. She simply played, never said a word. Until the last morning.

That morning, as the attendees were gathering at their tables, she stepped up to her mike and said, "I just wanted to say thanks." The conversation died down as everyone looked toward the stage.

"A few years ago," she began, "my life was pretty messed up. I was on the outside, looking in. Didn't care about much. Church? Couldn't care less. God? Couldn't care less."

"But then," she said, "something happened. You came out. You were on the inside, but you came out to me. You welcomed me. You let me know that my tattoos didn't matter. My piercings either! You showed me! You were real! After a while I started to get to know Jesus. I got to know him through you. So, I just wanted to say thanks."

Somebody stopped this young woman's march of death, spoke grace, and brought forth life.

Was it you? In the grace and power of God, will it be you?

Gracious God,

On this Sunday, as a school year ends, graduations, vacations, and our own annual picnic, lie ahead,
...we have many reasons to say “thank you!

“Thank you!” for the bright moments of our lives, for the celebrations and affirmations,
...that become the joyful landmarks of our journeys, long or short,

Yet, in all our lives, there are dark places and moments,
...casting shadows across the times and places of joy.

So, because you are a compassionate God, who wants light and life for us, we ask for your help.

Be with us in those times –

...times of difficult farewell,

...of ruptures that seem impossible to heal,

...of alienations that have lasted far too long.

Be with us in the hurts we will yet inflict, unintentionally, thoughtlessly, or impetuously,

...because of the slip of a word, an impulsive email, misheard sentence, broken confidence,

...or careless gossip,

...because it is in the darkness that your light shines the brighter, and calls us back home.

We pray also with gratitude for, and for your presence in, those easily forgettable moments,

...for what only seems ordinary, the rising and the setting of the sun, daily tasks that go unnoticed,

...miles traveled without appreciation for all there is to see and hear and smell,

...so we might come to know that there is no ordinary time, but always the extraordinary fact of life,

...the un-remarked miracle that we are here.

Remembering that fundamental, basic, wondrous miracle, of the life you have given us,

...we pray for those who are struggling with death and those who may be suffering,

...caregivers and those who care for them, those who are ill, and those who are lost,

...those who remember deeply, and those who strive to forget.

Loving God, to everything you have granted a season.

May our times of grief not embitter us

...but fill us with wisdom, perspective, and growing gratitude for each season.

Bless us all in all our situations.

May your presence be felt where it is most needed.

These things we pray, God of Life, remembering to you, those who face great challenges.

We pray for those in places of danger and difficult faithfulness, where death seems so powerful,

...for our military in Iraq and Afghanistan,

...for peacekeepers and relief workers in many troubled places,

...for those who are oppressed by governments, or by gangs, or by their own parents.

We pray for those known to us with special needs – Bobbie,