

With Skin On

Some years ago, at a gathering of companions enjoying an evening together, the conversation turned to friendship. One member of the group began to talk about being “a friend with skin on.” She was asked what that means. And this wise woman—who is herself a friend with skin on—answered the question with a response that went something like this:

Time passes. Life happens. Distance separates. Children grow up. Jobs come and go. Careers end. Love waxes and wanes. People don’t always do what they’re supposed to do. Loved ones die. Hearts break. But friends with skin on are *there*. A friend with skin on is never farther away than needing him or her can reach. In the valleys of your life, friends with skin on will be there. Cheering you on. Pulling for you. Praying for you. Interceding on your behalf. Walking beside you. Wiping away your tears. Putting their arms around you. Maybe even picking you up and carrying you out of the valley you’re in.

Isn't this the kind of friend you want to have? Isn't this the kind of friend you want to *be*? A friend with skin on suffers with you when you suffer. A friend with skin on has compassion.

In today's gospel reading, Luke tells a story of compassion. A story we don't find in any of the other gospels. As Jesus draws near to the town of Nain, he meets a funeral procession on its way to the cemetery outside the city gate. Behind those carrying the body walks a widow, a woman whose husband has died. And who has now lost her young adult son. She may have been in her teens when her son was born. She may still be fairly young. Or she might be older. Luke doesn't tell us her age. He doesn't even tell us her name. She could be you. She could be me. She could be any of us. Sooner or later, grief comes to us all.

Grief has come to this widow. There are no words. Only anguish. She has lost her husband. And her only son has just died. At this moment, it's more than she can bear.

Her despair is grounded in both grief and fear. The sorrow of her son's death mingles with the awareness that she may be next. In her day and time, widows face a particularly desperate situation. With no personal income or property, no health

insurance, no Social Security, no Medicare, a widow's economic dependence on a male relative is complete.

But this widow in Luke's Gospel has *lost* her only male relative. She's destitute. Facing the prospect of a stark future—the prospect of starvation. She's alone in the world.

Luke's account of this widow reverberates in the struggles of single persons in our contemporary culture. Many—perhaps most of us—experience singleness at some point in our adult lives; whether widowed, divorced, or never married. Being single in today's world presents myriad challenges. Financial. Social. Emotional. With one income at best, a single existence may be daunting economically. Thousands must choose between buying food and buying essential medication.

And singleness can be difficult socially, too. Those who aren't married or who are no longer married may not be included at gatherings and get-togethers and parties. When you're single, loneliness can close in. It sometimes seems as though the whole world consists of couples and families, and as though you're the only one who's alone. There are times when it's hard not to feel like an outsider. Even if a single person hasn't experienced the actual death of a loved one, he or she may be grieving another

kind of death. The death of a marriage. The unexpected loss of a job. The shattering of the dream of financial security.

Sometimes tears come. If tears have come to you, has anyone ever said, as you were weeping, “don’t cry”? If so, why do you think they said that? Do you think it could have been because witnessing your grief made *them* feel uncomfortable? Could they have been afraid that whatever was causing you to weep might happen to them as well?

One thing about tears: They can be a release. There are times when you and I *need* to weep. No one should tell you “don’t cry” unless they are prepared to take away the *source* of your grief.

As this widow weeps, Jesus says to her, “don’t cry.” But he doesn’t just say it and then go on his way. No. He removes the *reason* for her tears.

For as soon as he sees her, his heart goes out to her. His heart of love that births compassion. Jesus is all compassion! And Jesus, who has compassion for this widow of Nain, has compassion for you, too. He cares for you, even when it seems as though no one else does. When you’re at your lowest point, friends with skin on reach out. Friends with skin on show up. To

comfort. To embrace. To dry tears. Friends sent by God in Christ Jesus.

Whose compassion is love in action. And that's the brand of compassion Jesus desires from you and me. He calls us to go among the outcasts. He calls us to go among the forgotten. He calls us to go among the most vulnerable.

Because that's where *he* is. Is he concerned about ritual purity rules? Not so much. Jesus touches dead bodies. Jesus touches unclean lepers. Jesus gets touched by a hemorrhaging woman. Jesus does things the "holy" people of his day just don't do. And Jesus goes places they just won't go. Wherever the need is greatest, that's where we find Jesus. In places like the village of this desolated widow.

Where he steps forward. Places a hand on the casket. And invites the dead man to rise. Pallbearers freeze. A hush falls over the crowd. As new life flows into the widow's son, Jesus returns him to his mother. Tears of sorrow turn to tears of joy. This God of compassion has given her back her son.

The raising of this widow's only son resonates in everyone who has experienced the death of a child. Whether that son or daughter was an infant, a mature adult, or somewhere in

between, the death of a child is one of the most devastating losses that can, in this life, be faced.

Some of you have journeyed through this valley and come out on the other side. You are the parent of a child who has died. That is not all of who you are, but it is a part. And you will never again be the same as you were before. We expect one day to bury our parents. But we don't expect to bury our children. They are our hearts walking around outside us. If they leave us, it feels as though our hearts have been ripped away. The heartbreak of this parent of an only son in Luke's Gospel mirrors the emotions of every parent who has lost a child. And in the grip of overwhelming emotion, it's easy to forget that the God to whom you cry out in pain is the very One who experienced the death of *God's* only Son on a cruel cross.

Even so, reflecting on this narrative may cause us to wonder: Why did this widow get *her* dear one back, but I did not? How is it that such a miracle could happen in the first century, but not in the twenty-first? Is God no longer performing miracles? Or could it be, do you think, that we lack the eyes to see them?

In our own lifetimes, God has used human intellect as an instrument to greatly enhance medical technology, saving the lives of thousands—perhaps millions—of people who would otherwise not have survived. And numerous men and women have recounted near-death experiences, having been resuscitated after vital functions had ceased. Our God is still working miracles!

But when physical death *does* separate us from the ones we love, who can say that this separation is permanent, rather than only temporary? Who can say that what this God has in store for us—that what this God will *restore* to us, in God's own time, is not wonderful beyond anything we can possibly imagine?

Could those mourners at Nain have possibly imagined that Jesus would restore a widow's son to life and to his mother? No longer a funeral procession, this awestruck crowd realizes that they are in the presence of a wonder-working prophet, even a prophet like Elijah who also raised a widow's only son.

Who, then, *is* this Jesus? The gospels confront us with this question again and again. Luke the evangelist understands and wants *us* to understand that Jesus is so much more than a

teacher, so much more than a prophet. Today we hear Luke confessing Jesus as Lord.

For in Jesus, God has put on flesh. In Jesus, God comes to abide with us human creatures. This is the One who comes to you and me today, in the bread and in the wine. This is the compassionate One who cares and comforts and wipes away tears. This is the faithful One who redeems and restores. This is the almighty One whose arms are your shelter and your refuge.

This is the One who, with the crowd at Nain, we glorify. This is the One for whom we give thanks. This is the One whose good news we share and spread. For this is God with skin on. And he is the One who triumphs over death!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.