

“Bumping into a Funeral”
Luke 7:11-17
7th Sunday after Epiphany

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Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

The columnist Ross Douthat recently published a memoir about his ongoing battle with Lyme Disease.

In an affecting and moving way,
Douthat describes how his family purchased
their so-called “dream home” in Connecticut,
but before he even had a chance to settle in,
Douthat was bitten by a tick.

Symptoms began soon after:
Phantom heart attacks.
Insomnia.
A burning in his joints.

Even though Douthat visited countless doctors, no one could find the answer, no one could give him a cure.

Douthat is a Christian.
And he writes openly about his faith during this time.

“Under these conditions—
the perpetual press of symptoms...
my...half-hearted approach to prayer collapsed completely.”

“The only kind of prayer I could manage was a desperate begging...a demand for help repeated endlessly without an answer.”

While his experience with long-term Lyme Disease did not cause Douthat to lose his faith, it did prompt new questions for his faith:

Is God paying attention?
Where is God's love and compassion, right now when I need it most?

During the second year of his illness, Douthat was with his family at the beach. It was the same beach that he used to visit as a child, where his own mother had gone when she was young.

There was a spot where the sand gave way to barnacled rocks...where the tide met the stones; sometimes in her youth, my mother had found sand dollars there.

I had never found one in decades of looking, and over time it had become a game I played—

As a teenager, he would think:

If I find one today, it means that the girl I have a crush on has a crush on me.

If I find one today, it means I'll get into the college I want.

He never found a sand dollar, but he never forgot the game.

Inevitably, I had been playing the game all that vacation week, casually glancing in the shallows as I waded with my kids.

If I find one today it means I will get better.

If I find one today it means I will get better.

On [the] last day...I was in too much pain to play...feeling the fire spread down my left arm and side. At a certain point, the...agony broke me, and I began to sob there...and from somewhere in the depths I came out with a desperate, rasping croak.

“Help me, God. Why won’t you help me?”

Then he remarks:

**My eyes dropped to the water.
There between my feet, as tiny as a nickel
and as pale as a wedding dress,
was the only sand dollar I have ever found.¹**

Now...was that a coincidence?

Was it a random event, that sand dollar washing up right in front of him at that moment?

Or did Ross Douthat, in the depths of an agonizing illness, experience a gift from God? Was the sand dollar God’s way of telling Douthat that God had not forgotten him, that God was looking out for him?

I ask the question because this collision of RANDOMNESS and the DIVINE...it shows up today in our story from Luke.

Jesus approaches the gates of a town called Nain.
As he gets close, a funeral procession is coming out.

Jesus sees the procession, he sees the grieving mother who has lost her only son, and Luke writes: “the Lord...had compassion for her...”

Jesus tells her not to weep, and he says to the corpse:
“Young man, I say to you, rise!”

¹ Ross Douthat, *The Deep Places: A Memoir of Illness and Discovery*, New York: Convergent Books, 2021.

And miraculously, the mother's son is alive again.

Some may hear this story and ask:

Ok...but why *THIS* dead son?

It seems a little random, don't you think?

If Jesus had the power to raise the dead, why not exercise that power...all the time? Why not go around searching for every funeral he could find?

It's a good question, a fair question, but it doesn't appear to be the question that's on Luke's mind.

What is on Luke's mind is the mother.

The mother that Jesus encounters in this next is not only a grieving parent but also a widow—which means economic catastrophe for her. Without her only son, she has been left with no legal inheritance, which would mean being dependent on charity for the rest of her life.

She is vulnerable.

She is helpless.

And when Jesus saw her, Luke writes he “had compassion...”

The translation is accurate, but it's not strong enough.

The Greek word that Luke uses here—splanx-nee-z-o-mai...

it means that Jesus was moved in the depths of his being!²

Splanx-nee-z-o-mai...my Greek is pretty rusty, I don't even know if I'm saying that word right.

But it's an important word.

² I am indebted to the note in the HarperCollins Study Bible, NRSV and subsequent research on the Internet for the meaning of this Greek word. Here and throughout the sermon, I am not using the correct spelling of the Greek word.

It shows up two other times in Luke's Gospel.

In chapter 10, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan—and when he sees the wounded man on the side of the road, left for dead, the Samaritan...is splanx-nee-z-o-mai!

Filled with compassion, moved in the depths of his being...

In chapter 15, when Jesus tells the parable of the prodigal son, and the son is returning home to his father, his father sees his son, who is still far off—and the father is splanx-nee-z-o-mai!

Filled with compassion.
Moved to the depths of his being.

So on the one hand, our story from Luke today is a story of randomness...Jesus just happens to run across this widow, and who knows what would have happened had their paths not crossed that day?

But on the other hand, it's a story of compassion.
The power of compassion.
The difference that splanx-nee-z-o-mai can make on one person's life.

Do you know anything about that?
You don't have to be able to raise the dead to know about that.
Do you know about the difference that compassion can make in another person's life?

More than a century ago, an African-American 7th grader from segregated Daytona Beach, Florida prepared to board a train for Jacksonville so that he could attend high school.

His family dropped him off at the train station with the fare, but did not know he would need more money to ship his luggage. When he learned that he didn't have enough cash to ship his belongings, this 7th grader did what any other stranded child might do.

He sat down and cried.

But then he noticed a man standing in front of him—a complete stranger—this man asked that 7th grader why he was crying...and when he learned the problem, this stranger covered the fare for the luggage.

And that 7th grader went to high school, and on to college, and graduate school, and he grew up to become a preacher, a nationally-known spiritual leader in a previous generation. He was Howard Thurman—among the people who learned from Howard Thurman was Martin Luther King, Jr..

And when Howard Thurman sat down to write his autobiography late in life, do you know who he dedicated it to?

That stranger in the train station “who restored my broken dream 65 years ago.”³

Does compassion really have that kind of power?

The power not just to provide a band-aid, but to alter the course of a life?

In the category of random events, we had a cat appear at our back door this past week.

³ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, San Diego: Hardcourt Brace & Company, 1979. I am also indebted to an article in BU Today, by Rich Barlow, January 7, 2020 for reminding me of this story.

No collar, but it sure looks like she used to have a home. We can't keep her in our house, not with our dog, who would go bonkers, not with our family, because some in our house are allergic to cats...

But this cat will not go away.
She brushes up against the glass on the back door.
She wants to come inside.

Upon seeing the cat, I was not splanx-nee-z-o-mai.
I said, "It'll go away when it learns we're not letting it in."

Others in my house had a different take.

- A bowl of water and a bowl of food mysteriously appeared outside the door to keep it from going hungry.
- A crate mysteriously appeared so that it would have shelter from the rain.

Calls were made to the vet, to various agencies, no one seems to want a lost cat. If any of you want a lost cat, just talk to me after the service today...

But here's the thing.

Others in my house certainly felt more compassion toward this cat than I did at the beginning of the week. But now—ugh—the cat is starting to grow on me.

I am still not splanx-nee-z-o-mai!
But I do feel responsible for this cat.
Don't want anything bad to happen to this cat.
And I'm beginning to wonder just how far to take things...

Will we feed it for the next week?

The next month?

Will we find ourselves a year from now with a dog who sleeps in our house and a cat who sleeps outside our house?

You see, splanx-nee-z-o-mai is not just a hard word to say.

It's a hard word to practice.

It gets you into all sorts of random entanglements, creates all sorts of questions that you weren't asking before, offers you all kinds of responsibilities you didn't plan on having.

Have you ever seen splanx-nee-z-o-mai at work?

Dori Samadzai Bonner grew up in Afghanistan during the Russian occupation.

Her father worked for the government in Afghanistan.

But then, there was a regime change.

Her family needed to escape if they were going to stay alive.

“The only way out of the country was on forged papers,” she recounts.

“In the early 1990s, after a daring escape in the middle of the night, my parents and brother and I migrated to the U.S. on [those] forged papers and asked for political asylum. This meant that we could stay here temporarily while they reviewed our case.”

The family received a work permit, and everyone in the family started working.

“Fast forward five years,” Dori remembers, “our lives were so normal that the biggest thing on my mind...was how I could get my mom to extend my curfew and let me stay out late.”

But then a letter arrives in the mail.
A court date has been set.

When the family meets with the judge, the judge says: “Do I understand correctly that you came here on forged papers?”

Dori’s father replies, “Well, yes, but...”
He tries to explain.
The judge cuts him off.

“I just want to hear yes or no. I don’t care about the explanation.”

“You know, we here in the United States do not give citizenship to people that break the law. We can’t, and I won’t.”

And as soon as I translate this to my dad, Dori remembers, I put my head down, and I just start praying.

When I open my eyes, I see my dad rising out of his seat. He starts unbuckling his belt, at which point I’m thinking he’s completely losing his mind....

But he lifts up his shirt on the right side, looks at the judge, and says, “This is what the communists did to me.”

He’s pointing to a five-inch scar.

Then he shuffles his pants around a little bit, and turns, and points to three gunshot wounds. And he says:

“This is what the communists did to me.”

And he takes off his shoes.
And he points to his wounds on his feet.

And he says:

“This is what the communists did to me.”

And then he says to the judge:

“It’s easy for you to judge me...But if you came on this side, and looked at me—one man to another—you will see that everything I did, I did to save my children. I had no other choice....If you have to show the American public that you didn’t take it easy on us, I understand. Send me back. I volunteer. But please let my children stay. Please give my children a new home.”

And Dori’s father puts his head down and starts to cry.
And the judge leaves the room.

When he comes back an hour later, he walks straight to Dori’s father and puts a stamp in his hand and says, “Mr. Samadzai, I would like you to be the one to stamp your children’s papers.”

Then he stamps Dori’s parents’ papers.

And he looks at Dori’s father, and he says, “Welcome to America.”⁴

Now how did he make that decision?

That judge could have gone either way...how did he know about splanx-nee-z-o-mai?

I’m remembering something that a character in a Flannery O’Connor short story once said:

⁴ Dori Samadzai Bonner, “A New Home,” reprinted in *The Moth Presents All These Wonders: True Stories About Facing the Unknown*, New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2017.

“Jesus...raised the dead, and He shouldn't have done it.
He thrown everything off balance.”⁵

But it's not just the raising of the dead that throws everything off balance.

It's compassion.

It's that darn word that I don't know how to say.

Splanx-nee-z-o-mai.

That's what throws the world off balance.

The kind of compassion that doesn't care what trouble it will get you into, or what prejudices you'll have to defy, or what sacrifices you'll have to make.

The kind of compassion that moves you to the depth of your soul.

Gosh, this is embarrassing.

Our sermons here at Westminster, they get posted on social media, and now anyone who happens to watch this sermon will know that I have no idea how to pronounce this very important word in Luke's Gospel.

But you know what would be more embarrassing?

Not trying to live it.

Letting my desire for control,
or my hesitation about getting too entangled,
my focus on having things go just like I had planned...

⁵ Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," in *The Complete Stories*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971.

Letting all that keep splanx-nee-z-o-mai from ever throwing my world off balance.

Amen.