

FROM THE GUT

Luke 7:11-17, June 10, 2007

Rev. James Campbell

Years ago, when I first moved to New York, I had a friend named Paul. Paul, like so many others in those days, was desperately ill with AIDS in a time when there were no drug cocktails and very little chance for survival. But Paul was jaunty, even in the face of death. That's one of the reasons I liked him so much. And he lived a rather exciting life as a professional photographer. I was a bumpkin fresh from Ohio, while the urbane Paul socialized with celebrities, giving glittering parties in his high-rise apartment with a wrap around balcony. And he taught me some things that I have never forgotten – some trivial and some life-changing. Paul taught me that from the 32nd floor, summer and winter do not exist. From his balcony you couldn't see any trees. And Manhattan's skyscrapers look exactly the same whether it's December or August. Paul found that very monotonous. Paul also taught me the importance of living in the moment. For him, this was a daily goal, as his illness advanced relentlessly. Paul sucked the marrow out of every second. And Paul taught me to listen to my gut before I listened to all the voices in my head.

One day we were on the subway. Now this was back before the Number 1 train was packed with tourists from Des Moines. It was still a little scary back then. As we rattled our way downtown, Paul suddenly became very quiet, very attentive, while I chattered on. When we pulled into the next station, he simply said: "Follow me." The doors opened and we dashed into the next car. Once the doors had closed, I asked: "What was that all about?" Paul smiled... the kind of smile you give to

someone who is not the brightest bulb in the chandelier, and said: “James, if you’re going to live in New York, you’ve got to listen to your gut. Your gut will warn you when you’re in danger. And your gut is never wrong.” You see, in my naïveté, I had failed to notice some menacing behavior and the uneasy vibe that had settled over that car. I wasn’t listening to my gut because I wasn’t even trying.

Paul has been dead for more than 12 years now, but his wise advice lives on in me. His advice wasn’t novel. It’s the same kind of thing our moms used to say to us when they warned us to be alert, to pay attention. A friend of mine in Ohio will still occasionally tell me to “watch my top knot” a vague historical reference to being scalped.

Recently science has bolstered the claim that our guts can tell us important things that our heads sometimes miss or filter. Perhaps it’s a left over response from our more primitive days, when the world was a much more dangerous place for us humans. But our gut responses are not simply limited to fear. We can love people from the gut. Sometimes grief is like a punch in the gut. When confused, people who love us will sometimes ask, “What does your gut say?” It’s a good question, because in this often confusing world, with its myriad choices and battling philosophies, sometimes your gut response can cut through all the crap that is cluttering your mind and lead you on. It makes me wonder if the response of our gut is not one of the ways in which God is still speaking.

Jesus and his disciples and a large group of interested strangers traveled to the town of Nain, which was a village located a few kilometers south of Nazareth, where Jesus grew up. As they approached the village gate, they were met by a funeral procession. There, on the stretcher, was the body of a young man, washed in preparation for burial. In addition to family and friends, there was probably a group of professional mourners – people whose job is was to raise a ruckus, weeping and wailing and carrying on. That, in and of itself, is a tragic scene, but then Luke gives us some details that would break the hardest heart.

The dead man was the only son of the mourning mother. And the mourning mother was a widow. That's a sad story in 2007, but in Jesus day, but not only was this woman left alone in the world, but this woman was left destitute. With her husband dead, she depended upon her son to provide for her material needs. It wasn't like she could collect on the insurance money or go out and get a job. The stringent patriarchy of the day made that impossible. And so left with no man in her life, she had exactly two choices: prostitution or starvation – the same choice some widows in this world still face in repressive fundamentalist cultures. Her husband was dead. Her son was dead. And soon enough, she would be dead.

Luke reports that when the Lord Jesus saw her, he had compassion on her. But the translation here is very poor, for the Greek word, “splanchna” really means that her plight broke Jesus' heart; that it deeply moved him; that it shook him up, in his soul, in his heart, in his gut. The verb is very strong and very rare in the New Testament.

And being moved from his gut, Jesus did a most shocking thing: he disregarded the Law of God and the tradition of his culture and the expectations for a respectable rabbi. He put away all those things that might have clouded his mind, and in the spirit of the moment he walked up to the stretcher and he put his hand on it, coming in contact with a dead body, in direct violation of the Scripture. And coming in contact with death, he became ritually unclean, taking on the dirt and dread of death on behalf of people he didn't know. Then Jesus turned to the grieving mother and said, "Don't cry." And turning to the lifeless body of her son, Jesus said: "Young man, I say to you, get up!" And the young man sat up and began to speak. Jesus gave him back his life, and in doing so gave the mother back her own life. And he did it by following his gut and not the rules.

And what was the crowd's response to all of this? Luke says that fear seized them all. Isn't that an interesting response? Maybe they were afraid because a dead man had been brought back to life. Or maybe they were afraid because when Jesus broke the rules he upended their expectations about God and life and society. That scares a lot of people. Whatever the case, in the next moment, after that initial shock was over, their fear turned to glory as they witnessed what an unfettered compassion can do. And they praised God.

This is dangerous talk to lots of people. It sounds like I am glibly suggesting that we ignore the teachings of Scripture. I am not. But I am saying that any interpretation of the Christian faith that lacks a gut-level compassion, that stops us from being moved from our hearts, is not of God. And I am saying that to be mature Christian

people means to live in the Spirit, to be moved by the Spirit, into some deadly, dirty places.

Years ago, before it was so commonplace to find out gay people in churches, the pastor of an expatriate Baptist Church in Jerusalem was condemned and vilified because he allowed two gay men, in a relationship, to sing in his church's choir. When he was called before the denominational officials, who quoted the Bible to him and considered his actions and these two men unclean, he responded: "When I stand before God to give an account, if I am wrong, I would rather err on the side of compassion than on the side of judgment." Well, me too.

We live in a confusing world. We live in a world of religious fanaticism and blind adherence to wooden readings of the Scriptures. We live in a world in which coldness and cruelty and legalism are tragically mistaken for the will of God. Is it any wonder that people like Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris are making such strong cases for atheism, as they look at religious people who would rather follow the rules that get dirty for the sake of love? If I have to choose between the rules and my gut, then I want to do what Jesus did and follow my gut. Don't you? I want to be motivated by compassion and generosity and openness, because that kind of love can raise the dead. It can raise our dead churches. It can raise our dead nation. It can raise us. Amen.