

Abundant Life: Compassion
Matthew 5:1-12 (NRSV)
November 5, 2023
Pastor Sarah Wiles

¹When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²And he began to speak and taught them, saying:
³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

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This week a friend of mine sent me an eight-year old story from the *Arkansas Times*. It's the story of a woman from a little town in Arkansas named Ruth Coker Burks.¹ It was 1984. Ruth was 25 and had a friend with cancer at University Hospital in Little Rock. She went to visit her regularly enough that she got to know the place pretty well. Then there was the day she saw the door covered in a big red bag. She didn't know what it meant, but she would watch the nurses draw straws to see who would go in. They'd say, "Best two out of three," and then they'd say, "Can we draw again?"

She began to suspect the patient must have AIDS. She had a gay cousin in Hawaii, so she knew a little about it. She kept walking past that red door, watching the nurses draw straws, until her curiosity got the better of her, or, maybe, she says, it was "some higher power moving her." She walked through that red door and found a skeletal young man. He told her he wanted to see his mother before he died.

Ruth marched right back to that nurses' station and demanded they call his mother. They laughed at her. They said, "Honey, his mother's not coming. He's been here six weeks. Nobody's been here, and nobody's coming."

So Ruth walked back to the room, trying to summon the nerve to tell this man his mother wasn't going to come. But when she walked back in, "he said, 'Oh, mamma. I knew you'd come,' and then he lifted his hand."

¹ Significant parts of the story that follows are taken directly from <https://arktimes.com/news/cover-stories/2015/01/08/ruth-coker-burks-the-cemetery-angel?oid=3602959>.

So what did Ruth do? She took his hand, without gloves, probably the first person who'd done that in the six weeks he'd been there, and pulled up a chair and said, "I'm here, honey. I'm here." She sat there by his bed for the next 13 hours until he drew his last breath.

After he died, she got the number for his mother and called her. His mother still wanted nothing to do with her son. So, Ruth paid for the cremation out of her own savings, put his ashes in a chipped cookie jar for an urn, and took him to her old family cemetery. There, alone, with a post-hole digger, she laid him to rest beside the grave of her father.

Over the next few years, word got out in the Arkansas gay community that there was a woman who wasn't afraid. She sat with dozens of men as they died, and when their families wouldn't take them, she buried them in her little family cemetery. She'd take her daughter with her. Her daughter brought a spade, and Ruth would use the post-hole digger. They did the funerals themselves because they couldn't get a single priest or pastor to come.

All of that is thirty or forty years ago now. It's mostly been forgotten. Because the people she knew all died.

Today, when she looks back on those years, she still sometimes cries from the horror of it all. But in the article in the Arkansas times it said that then she will wipe her eyes and say, "They were good days because I was blessed with handing these people back to God."

Blessed are those who are poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek and the merciful. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you.

These are strange blessings. I do not think Jesus is saying we should seek suffering so we can be blessed. I think, as our call to worship by Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber brought to life for me, Jesus is saying, "All you folks who the world won't bless? You *are* blessed. In my world, you are loved, cherished, remembered." That is what Ruth came to know deep in her bones. That's what she shared with person after person.

Ruth embodied the compassion of Christ. We may not all get the chance to do something so dramatic. Ruth just sort of stumbled into it. But we all have that compassion within us.

One Greek word often translated as compassion in the gospels means to be moved in the inward parts, literally to be moved in one's bowels. The gut was the seat of powerful feeling back then. Like our hearts fall in love today, back then you loved from your gut.

That's what compassion is like in true Christian community. Not like those priests and pastors who wouldn't do a funeral. It's compassion deep in your gut. You can't help it. That's what we try to live into here. We talked last week about being a community. But this is not just any community. It is a community of compassion. Here we grow softer together. We let ourselves be moved. We bless and are blessed in compassion.

Today we observe All Saints Day. It's one of the most tender days of the church year. We remember with joy and gratitude and grief those folks who showed us what love looks like—which is what a saint is.

Ruth isn't sure how many men she buried in her family's cemetery, alone with her daughter and their post-hole digger and spade. She believes it was forty-three, but she's not sure.

Somewhere in her attic, in a box, there are dozens of yellowed day planners she calls her Books of the Dead. They are filled with the appointments, setbacks, and medications of people from forty years ago. And in between all those notes, those notes of care, each precious name is recorded. They are not forgotten. Children of God, every one of them. Sinners and saints. Beloved. Blessed.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023