

Well, I succumbed to peer pressure recently and got Netflix. I really had no intention of getting WebTV – I am, after all, a self-professed Luddite who avoids new technology, but my TV went on the fritz and when I went to replace it, this was what was on sale. I got Netflix for the sole purpose of watching one particular series I’d heard about – which I’m not going to admit publicly what it is because you’ll think to yourselves, “My pastor recommended *that*?” But once I had it, naturally it became a necessity as I was able to find old movies and I didn’t have to pay to watch them again. So it was that a couple of weeks ago, I watched *Mad Men* for the very first time.

Now, with apologies to our own advertising executives, I should admit that I know next to nothing about PR.

I get the basics; that you have to position yourself, or rather, your brand in such a way that what is unique about it is portrayed positively. And if, in the case of Don Draper, what you are positioning is cigarettes, which are essentially the same as everyone else’s, you have to create the perception that your brand is different.

As Don Draper was sitting in an ad meeting with executives from the company he was representing, he asked how they made their product. The president of the company ran through a quick agricultural description of what they did and Draper pulled out one word of it to focus the advertising, to which the company president said, “but everybody does that.”

And Don Draper said, “Yes, but we’ll be the first to *say* you do it. Anyone else would just be copying you.”

I never thought about just how much certain brands are associated with being first – plenty of car companies have airbags all over their cars, but the companies that came up with them first are the ones we still think of as the *safe* cars. After patents expire, almost every pharmaceutical comes out in generic form – but we know them by their brand names. Tissues are Kleenex, copiers are Xerox, bleach is Clorox, and the list goes on and on. Getting there first is key.

But of course, Jesus didn't get there first when it comes to the concept of messiah figure. There is John the Baptist before him – when you think “prophet of the first century,” at the front end of Luke, Jesus is the also-ran.

Indeed, even though we now think of *messiah* and associate the term solely with Jesus, that wouldn't be accurate to the first century. We do a lot of interpolation on the role of messiah carrying our New Testament understanding and putting it on it, but the truth is, when Jesus was born, the New Testament wasn't written. The only thing the Israelites had to go on was the Old Testament. And the Old Testament has a decidedly different cast of what constitutes a *messiah*. We hear the term and think of Handel, and *king of kings and lord of lords*, and the Israelites heard the term and thought, David. Or Saul, or Elijah – anyone who has been anointed by God for a task.

The term just means God's anointed, and God anointed a lot of people to a lot of tasks in the Old Testament.

By the time we get to Jesus in the time of the New Testament, there is already a lock on the brand of prophet. Everyone knows who the prophet is – it's Elijah. And if you are going to *be* someone of significance, you have to meet that metric. You remember Elijah? You remember how he went toe to toe 450 of the priests of Ba'al to declare the

truth of the Living God? You remember how he stared down Queen Jezebel as she threatened to kill him or die trying?

The “fearless leader, speaking the truth to power,” that is what it means to be the prophet in Hebrew culture.

And so, when in Luke, Jesus raises the widow’s son back to life in the early chapters, it is a PR dream come true. If you can’t get there first, you have to do something extraordinary to break out of being the copy-cat.

There were plenty of people running around the Judean countryside styling themselves as messiahs – some were political leaders, some were militia leaders and guerilla fighters, some, like John, were powerful preachers calling the faithful back to righteousness.

In other words, while we use the term *messiah* to refer to a unique person, they didn’t. It just wasn’t how they understood the term – it would include prophets as well, and when Jesus raises this widow’s son in Luke he has claimed the mantle of the ultimate prophet, the Cadillac of prophets, the great and inimitable Elijah.

But why?

There is nothing yet to indicate that Jesus aspired to style himself after Elijah, that’s Luke’s interpretation. Indeed, in a few short chapters, Jesus will ask a question of his disciples as to who people say that he is and they will reply with their answers: Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist, and he will take great pains to distinguish himself from all the other definitions of messiah and prophet that are cluttering the religious landscape around him. Why in *this* moment does he raise a dead man to new life? Why him?

It's a PR dream come true, but to what end? Whatever associations with Elijah come as a result of it, they are quickly dispelled as his ministry continues. Jesus is in the line of Elijah, but he himself is *not* Elijah.

You see, there is a subtext bubbling just beneath the surface of this story that we are meant to take as instructive for our lives and our practice of faith.

In raising *this* woman's son – and not someone else – Jesus' action is not so much a demonstration of raw power – “hey, look what I can do” – as it is an act of compassion. This woman, a widow, no means of support, no husband, now no child, is without place in the culture, without someone to provide for her old age, to care for her when the time came that she could no longer care for herself.

It is a demonstration of power, to be sure, but what is more is it is a demonstration of compassion. It's not so much, “hey, look what I can do,” as it is, “This is who I am.” You see, the exercise of the role of prophet in the Bible is always the exercise of the grace of God.

So, God raised up a prophet, when God sent someone to speak the Word to the people it was *always, always* an act of grace: God is working to reshape and restart and refill the people. It's always grace – and God's grace never runs dry.

And when Jesus acts, it is not an act of power for the sake of power, it is an act of grace for the sake of compassion. It is not a PR dream come true, it is God's dream lived. Compassion is like the stone thrown in the still pond, I think. Ripples go in every direction.

When I think of compassion, certain names come to mind – perhaps that is true for you as well – Mother Teresa is at the forefront.

I think we all know what Mother Teresa was about – we have the visual of her crinkled eyes and wrinkled face and distinctive sari. We know that she cared for people whom society left behind. We know of her extraordinary gestures – for instance, when she accepted the Nobel Prize, she declined to have a banquet thrown in her honor and asked instead that the money be used to feed four hundred of India's poor. A friend of mine spent a summer between semesters at Davidson College working with Mother Teresa's foundation in Calcutta and she returned and said, "Yes, she's a saint, but she also has an iron will."

But have you ever heard Mother Teresa describe her own work?

Her description of the mission of The Missionaries of Charity when accepting the peace prize was: "to care for the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the crippled, the blind, the lepers, all those people who feel unwanted, unloved, uncared for throughout society, people that have become a burden to the society and are shunned by everyone."

To exercise compassion – that was her calling – and the ripples are still spreading, years after her death.

But what she was doing was lining her will up with the will of God.

Do me a favor, will you? Pick up your bulletins and look at the call to worship. It's the other Psalter lesson for today – what does it say God does?

Let's just read it together – the second couplet: "The Lord sets the prisoners free, the Lord opens the eyes of the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous, the Lord watches over the strangers, he upholds the orphan and the widow but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin."

That's what God does!

That's *who* Jesus is!

That's the exercise of compassion.

When Jesus raises up this widow's son, he is actively engaged in the ministry of compassion – it is more than a PR stunt.

It is the expression of who God is.

Not too long ago I had lunch with one of our elders and she asked me a question that has been nagging me for a few weeks – we were talking about our strategic plan that Morningside is presently engaged in – maybe you've seen some of the work around the building - and some of the challenges that we will take on over the next six months, and she asked me this question, "What makes Morningside unique? We all feel that it is unique, but why exactly?"

"Well," I answered, "We are a welcoming congregation."

"But every church says that," she said.

"But we really mean it," I countered!

"Sure we do, but every church says it's welcoming and we can't just say, 'but we're welcoming times ten.'"

I had to think about it.

In the Presbyterian Church, the pastor does not set the direction for a church by himself or herself – it's always a communal effort. But that doesn't mean that pastors don't have goals for their congregations and that I don't have goals for us.

But I want to be very clear: I don't have a numerical goal for us for membership. I'm not secretly planning that we have to be say, a thousand members, to consider ourselves

successful. There's not a magic number wherein we will achieve something like success as a congregation.

I don't have a monetary metric either. Money is important in how we run the church, but raising, say a million dollar budget, won't make us a successful congregation – the day a million dollars is needed to support the ministry of Morningside and we raise it, great, it means we're staying healthy and paying our bills – nothing more.

I don't have a worship attendance goal for us – I notice, and others notice, if you miss church, but having all 548 members of Morningside in worship on the same day won't mean we've crossed a threshold of successful ministry, but it would be nice to see everyone at the same time. It'll be like Easter. I'd probably fall out of my chair.

My hope, prayer, goal – whatever term you want to use – for us together is that we won't settle for less than what God wants from us – that we align ourselves with God so that we will strive to be the best version of Morningside Presbyterian Church that we can possibly be.

And at the heart of God's call to us is a call to deep compassion – that's what Jesus is demonstrating by his choice of whom to raise and when.

Truthfully, I think everything that we love about this place comes out of a sense of God's call to deep compassion – the way we want to welcome everyone the way we've been welcomed, the way we want to care for each other when we're down – the way we have great big congregational lunches – to be together and provide fellowship for the lonely – arises, I hope, from the expression of the deep compassion to which God calls us.

Each of our mission activities comes from the belief that God calls us to deep compassion in how we live in the world. Whether it's giving money from our operating budget to

support the agencies that do what we believe Jesus is calling us to do, or if it's making meals and carrying them down to the shelters that give safety and modest comfort to people experiencing homelessness, or the members of our church who dedicated countless hours to planning a benefit for Our House, because everyone knows that children need stability and education and opportunities – absolutely every child deserves that start in life.

When we are doing the activities that line us up with God's will for the world and our lives, we will find that compassion is the heart of what we are doing.

And there's a difference between compassion and sympathy – do you know what it is? Sympathy is feeling sad for people. Compassion is feeling sad for people and wanting to do something about it.

And when we are doing something about what God believes is important – consult your bulletin if you need to – it gives life.

William Sloane Coffin observed once that there is a difference between the two bodies of water that we encounter in the stories of the Bible. He writes,

“Both are fed by the Jordan River. In one fish play and roots find sustenance. In the other, there is no splash of fish, no sound of bird, no leaf about. The difference is not in the Jordan, for it empties into both, but, in the Sea of Galilee: for every drop taken in, one goes out. It gives and lives. The other gives nothing. It is called the dead sea.”¹

That is true of churches, and it is true of Christians. The life to which God calls us is the way that gives life, that rests in the deep compassion of God, and in which the grace of God flows through us – for every drop in, another flows out – to God's people: both the

¹ William Sloane Coffin, Credo. W/JKP, Louisville, 2004. P15

rich and the poor, the lonely and the effervescent, the young and old, the smelly and the clean, in the sure and certain knowledge that God's grace never runs dry.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.