

One of the standard entry points for conversational evangelism is to tell a person, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." I believe that this is true. I say that very same thing to people in pastoral counseling. God does love you and God does have a wonderful plan for you life.

The problem, of course, comes from the fact that God's version of a wonderful plan for your life and your version of a wonderful plan for your life rarely coincide. I just saw a cartoon to this affect. There is a picture of a Roman Colosseum. On the field is a group of Christians huddling together in fear. Coming out of a pit are several hungry lions heading straight toward the Christians. Below the picture is the caption – you guessed it – "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." (!)

Someone sent me a list of church bulletin bloopers – announcements that actually appeared in church bulletins. A few that are germane to my theme are "*At the evening service the sermon topic will be 'What is Hell?' Come early and listen to our choir practice.*" And, "*Ladies Bible Study will be held Thursday morning at 10am. All ladies are invited to attend a luncheon after the B.S. is done.*" And then, finally, my personal favorite, "*Don't let worry kill you off – let the church help!*" You know, with friends like God, who needs enemies?

The widow of Nain surely must have felt this way. We read her story in the gospel of Luke this morning. Her husband had already died. And now, as we pick up her story, her son has died. And not just her son, but her only son. The deaths of her husband and son left her destitute - not just emotionally, but also financially. Surely, burying her husband and her only son was not in her plan for her life. You could forgive her for feeling that God did not love her.

I hope you haven't been in the widow of Nain's exact situation, although I know many of you have buried both and husband and a child. But I know all of you have been in situations where you feel like your life is derailed. And you do not feel God's love. You feel that He has abandoned you.

I remember feeling this way when my parents divorced. Christie and I had just gotten married and left for an extended backpacking trip in Europe. My parents took us to BWI airport on a sunny June day and waved goodbye as we walked through our gate. 2 months later I called them from a train station in Tralee, Ireland. My mother told me that they were separating. I just couldn't believe it.

We were the picture of a successful family, so I thought. I felt my entire world unravel. I sat down on the train platform, underneath the pay phone, and cried my eyes out. I understand that some marriages get to a terrible place with no way forward. So I don't judge or condemn my parents or anyone else in this position. But, this dissolution of my family was definitely not my plan for my life. To be

honest, it still hurts to this day, 24 years later. This is why I always say my favorite line in the wedding service with extra feeling, *“Those whom God has joined together, let no one put asunder.”*

It’s not often you get to use the word “asunder” in a sentence. It’s a strong word. To be put asunder means to be broken into separate parts or pieces. It’s not often that you use the word “asunder”, but there are plenty of times in life when you feel like your life is asunder – broken into separate parts or pieces. If there is a wonderful plan for your life, you sure don’t see it.

The widow of Nain’s life was put asunder by the deaths of her husband and her son. And this is where God enters the story. The widow is not looking for God, asking for God, searching for God. She is just suffering and grieving. She’s leading the corpse of her only son as he lies on a bier, probably in an open cedar coffin. The bier is the stand on which a body is placed. So, presumably, her son has died within a day or two and is being carried out of the city gate for burial.

Jesus quickly assesses the situation. The woman leads the bier alone; the family usually walks together in front of the coffin, with family and friends trailing behind the bier. Jesus sees immediately that because the woman is walking alone she is a widow, with no one to care for her. The bible says, *“When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her.”* Jesus’ response is compassion. We see it all through the gospels. Again, the woman doesn’t ask for compassion, or help, or anything. We don’t know if she has any faith or any knowledge of Jesus. Jesus just sees the woman’s life, torn asunder, and has compassion on her.

God has compassion on you. Men and women sometimes have compassion on others; sometimes we have hard hearts. This is the true story of a son returning home from Vietnam. From California he called his high society family in Boston. The son said to his mother, *“I called to tell you that I wanted to bring a buddy home with me.”* The mother said, *“Sure, bring him along for a few days.”* The son says, *“But there is something I need to tell you about him. One leg is gone, one arm is gone, one eye is gone, and his face is disfigured.”*

His mother said again, *“You may still bring him home for a few days.”* The son responded, *“I don’t think you understand. I want to bring him home to live with us.”* Then the mother started making excuses about what people would think and the embarrassment of living with such a disfigured boy. Then the phone line clicked dead.

A few hours later a policeman called the mother from California. He said, *“We have just found a boy with one arm, one leg, one eye and a mangled face. He shot himself in the head and is dead. The identification on his body says that he is your son.”*

There are consequences to our hard hearts, of course. And thankfully, there are also consequences to God’s compassionate heart. The consequence of His

compassion is His intervention in our lives. In the story we see Jesus stop the funeral procession and touch the bier. When He touched the bier, he broke the Jewish law. By touching the dead, he was ritually defiled. Jesus did not care. He did it anyway because He cares for people, not ritual. His compassion trumps ceremony every time.

In this case, the mother who lost her son gets him back again. *“Do not weep”*, Jesus says to her. *“Young man, I say to you, arise”*, Jesus says to him. *“And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.”* God shows his compassionate love to the widow of Nain. God’s plan for her life included some dramatic lows and some dramatic highs.

Your life is the same, perhaps not with the same dramatic highs and lows. But God’s plan for your life includes laughter, but it also includes lions. The thing is – everyone’s life has lions, whether we acknowledge God and his love or not. Isn’t a better thing to know that He is in control of every lion lurking in your life.

Not only is God in control, God is in the middle of your struggle with the lions. In the picture of the Colosseum, Jesus would be right in the middle of the fearful huddle. He willingly suffered and died for the sake of his people. As he gave the widow of Nain her son back from the dead, did He think about His own widowed mother who would also lose a Son? Who knows?

What we do know is that when Jesus died, the curtain in the temple was torn asunder, or as the King James Versions says, *“rent in twain from top to bottom.”* The curtain separating God and suffering, sinful, people was rent asunder. God comes from behind His curtain and into your life with his love, even when you’re not asking or looking for Him. Such is the nature of his compassion.

One of my favorite works of religious art is the statue of the Compassionate Christ. He looks over Rio de Janeiro with His arms outstretched, as if to say, “come unto me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” God has come from behind the curtain and in the midst of the lions to be with you. His arms are outstretched, ready to enfold you.

I felt God’s arms as I sat sobbing on the train platform in Tralee, Ireland reeling with the news of my parents’ separation, slumped down in a fearful huddle. His compassionate arms were in the form of my new wife and also my best friend, Drew. Drew was in Oxford that summer and took a week off to travel with us. He had been at my house nearly every day since we were little. He understood and suffered with me. Even in my hurt, I felt the arms of the Compassionate Christ, whose arms are ever, and even now, extended out to you. Amen.

