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## **“What Are the Chances?”**

**A sermon by Mindy L. Douglas**

**10<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)**

**June 5, 2016**

**Psalm 146; Luke 7:11-17**

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What are the chances?

What are the chances that a man in the Durham Senior Amateur golf tournament three years ago, Kelly Ritter, would make a hole-in-one on the 11<sup>th</sup> hole? The chances are not so good, really. About the same as finding a pearl inside an oyster. And yet he did.

And what are the chances that a second man in the Durham Senior Amateur Golf Tournament, Gerry Silva, would, only an hour later, make a hole-in-one on the same 11<sup>th</sup> hole? Even worse, actually. About 1.5 million to one. And yet, he did.

And what are the chances that a promotional sign awarding an ES 300h luxury hybrid Lexus sedan to anyone who made a hole-in-one was placed not at the 2<sup>nd</sup> hole, which was the one insured for such a giveaway, but on the 11<sup>th</sup> hole where the two holes-in-one were actually made? Highly unlikely, right? And yet . . .

While the dealership would like to say there was no chance in the world that any of this could or would happen, the truth of the matter is that it did happen. All of it. The dealership kept its word, though, in spite of the fact that its insurance wouldn't pay, and the two men drove away in their new hole-in-one 1.5 million-to-one long shot cars. Wow.

Now long shots do happen, you know, which is why people buy lottery tickets. Because they hope that the long shot will happen to them. And sometimes it does. But you would have a better chance of being struck by lightning than winning the big ticket lottery prize.

Sadly, unhappy long shots happen, too, and rare diseases show up where they are least expected sometimes, or you or your loved one gets a diagnosis that no one saw coming because it wasn't realistic, it wasn't even a possibility, there really was no chance. Until there was.

In today's story from Luke's gospel, the widow of Nain found herself in one of those unhappy long-shot situations. What were the chances that her husband would die and leave her stranded and on her own? What were the chances that she would have only one son? What were the chances that he would die, too, as a young man and leave her alone and destitute with no way to support herself, with no power to advocate for her needs, and no man to give her a place in society?

Widows, you see, in first century Judea, were people on the margins of society. They relied on their father, or their husband, or their sons, or at the very least their brothers to support them. But occasionally, rarely, a woman found herself without any of those traditional supports, and no matter what the chances were, that left only one thing: a death sentence.

Maybe that is why so many were a part of the funeral procession heading out of Nain, a Galilean town about 25 miles southwest of Capernaum. Maybe that is why so many followed the funeral bier to the outskirts of town where the young man would be buried because they knew that his death meant the inevitable death of his mother, the widow, the one without rights, the one whose belongings would all be transferred to her dead husband's family. And nobody had extra money in those days. To take on another mouth to feed would be too much. So they were sorry for this widow to whom chance had brought inevitable destitution and death, but there was nothing they could do. Nothing, after all, that they could do.

So what are the chances, I wonder, that this funeral procession was met by another large crowd at the town gate, this one coming into the town, this one being led by

Jesus, who was coming from Capernaum, where he had been busy healing the servant of a centurion who had great faith. I imagine they were talking and laughing and sharing their own business and talk of the day when they passed the funeral procession. Maybe, as is the custom in the rural south, the people following the disciples pulled over on the side of the road, so to speak, halted their hurried frenzy to get from one place to the other, and showed respect for the dead. Maybe they stopped talking for a few minutes to bow their head and look at the ground as the mournful procession passed. Maybe they did. At some point, as the two large crowds intersected at the town gate, Jesus noticed her—the grieving widow, the childless mother. She didn't cry out to him. She didn't ask Jesus to rescue her son from the grips of death. She probably didn't even see him, or didn't know him from Adam. But there he was, all of a sudden it seems, right next to her, his heart full of compassion, as the text tells us, and he says to her, "Do not weep." Not in a condemning way, "Stop crying, woman!" but in a voice full of compassion, in a voice full of understanding what her pain must be in losing her only son after having lost her husband and what her fear must be for her future, which was dark, dark indeed.

The Greek word for compassion is *splanchnizomai*—a word found about a dozen times in the gospels and nowhere else. The verb form comes from the noun *splanxna*, which means your innards—your bowels, heart, lungs, liver or kidneys, your internal organs, which in those days were believed to be the center of human emotion.<sup>1</sup> Luke uses the word in two well-known parables that follow this healing story—in the story of the Good Samaritan, when the Samaritan man is so moved with compassion that he stops his journey and helps the man beaten and left to die find safety and recovery, and also in the story of the Prodigal Son, when the father sees his son returning home and is filled with compassion and welcomes his renegade with open arms. In other places when Jesus sees those who are sick, he has compassion on them and cures them. When he sees those who are hungry, he has compassion on them and feeds them. When he is surrounded by another large crowd of blind, lame, crippled and voiceless, he has compassion on them. When the blind beggars in Jericho call out for help, Jesus has compassion on them and restores their sight.

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Clendenin essay "Jesus and the Widow of Nain: His Heart Went Out to Her" found at [www.textweek.com](http://www.textweek.com)

Jesus was a man of deep compassion, and on this day, his compassion guided him away from his own crowd and into another crowd where a mother is weeping for her son and for her future. He approaches the funeral bier and touches it, caring not that purity laws forbid him to do so, caring not that he would himself be outcast for becoming unclean, caring only that this man was dead and therefore soon would be his mother. He commanded the body of the young man to rise, and the dead man sat up and started talking and, as the passage says, “Jesus gave him to his mother.” Fear seized all of them, and no wonder, because a dead man just sat up from his casket and started talking and visions of horror films like “Night of the Living Dead” start swimming in their heads, but only for a few minutes, or seconds really, as they realize that the young man is alive now, really alive, and Jesus, this man Jesus must be a prophet, must be a promise fulfilled, must be one worthy of worship, and so they glorify him and give thanks to God.

What are the chances that this man could be the Messiah, the fulfillment of the promise and hope of scripture for the future of Israel? What are the chances?

In the next few verses, John the Baptist’s men report back to John what they have seen and John sends a message back to Jesus saying, “Are you the one?” And in an echo of the prophet Isaiah, Jesus sends a message back to John: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor [*like the widow and the orphan*<sup>2</sup>] have good news brought to them.”

“What are the chances?” asks John the Baptist?

“The chances are good,” responds Jesus, “that I am the one. Just look around and see the radical care and compassion for those in need demonstrated in my actions. Chances are very good, nay, absolutely 100%, that I am the one to bring forth the Kingdom of God, the kingdom of grace and peace, the kingdom of hope and love, the kingdom of new life and new chances at living.”

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<sup>2</sup> Italics indicate my addition.

And so here, friends, is the biggest question of all for those who hear this text today—What are the chances we can follow Jesus with such compassion for the poor, the sick, the marginalized, the oppressed? What are the chances that we can live our lives seeking healing for those lost and alone, voiceless and destitute? What are the chances, indeed, that we will be the church we are called to be? The church that follows Jesus?

The chances, my friends, are good. Because we have God as our parent, Jesus as our Lord, and the Holy Spirit as our guide.

We gather this day around the table of grace and promise. The table where we meet Jesus and are filled—filled—with the grace Jesus has to offer us. Filled so that we might be bearers of light and hope and compassion to a world that knows not these things but hungers deeply for them.

I am not a statistician, of course, but I can tell you this—chances are that those of you have heard God’s Word today, those of you who will be filled with the gifts of Jesus’ body and blood, those of you who have been strengthened by the presence and support of community and the Holy Spirit this day will be the very ones who go out in the world filled with compassion and care for God’s people in deepest need. Chances are good that Jesus staked his life on it.

All glory, laud and honor be to God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.