

June 5, 10th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Luke 7:11-17

by [Mihee Kim-Kort](#) in the [May 25, 2016](#) issue

I served a church that each summer worked with a Pentecostal church in the Dominican Republic. When we were there, the bulk of our work involved forming bucket lines to move everything from blocks to buckets of *mezcla*, a cement mixture. Over a period of five years we watched a tiny wooden shack of a church become a large building that housed not only a church but a vocational school, medical clinics, and a water distribution center.

The church was pastored by a married couple. Adrianna was a petite woman but a pistol—sharp, decisive, and a respected leader in the wider community. Her husband, Juan José, was a large man with a rumbling bass voice that shook the walls every time he sang. His arms easily wrapped my husband Andy in a hearty embrace as soon as we landed in Santo Domingo.

One year we learned that Juan José had been diagnosed with thyroid cancer. Adrianna, who was also a medical doctor, recommended treatment right away; so did other physicians. But Juan José declined it. He had faith that if the Lord willed it, the Lord would heal his body of the disease. He died a little less than a year later, after spending his final months fasting and praying for a miracle. We were all devastated. We could only imagine the heartache and grief in the community, and in particular, what the church's *pastora* felt in losing her spouse and ministry partner.

Whenever I hear that someone's loved one has been diagnosed with a terminal illness, I think of Juan José. I think of how impossible it is for me to imagine the process of going through such difficult treatments, and of the role faith plays for those who are sick and for the loved ones who hold them during that season. And I think of how Juan José's faith compelled him to forgo treatment. In the end, his faith led to his death. Though it isn't my right to judge, I can't help feeling a mixture of sadness and frustration, and a bit of confusion, too. I don't know what his spiritual and mental processes were as he struggled with his diagnosis, but I wonder: *Is this truly faith?*

In Luke's Gospel, many of the encounters Jesus has with people are described in terms of whether or not they have faith. Immediately before this week's reading, a centurion's faith is recognized as the source of his daughter's healing. Shortly after it, a woman washes Jesus' feet in the home of a Pharisee—and Jesus commends her for her faith, which has saved her.

Yet this week's story of the widow of Nain and her son stands in contrast to so many of the healing stories: the person in need never asks for Jesus' help. This mournful mother does not seek Jesus out. Her faith is never commended. In fact, she never speaks aloud in this narrative. Instead, Luke writes that Jesus sees her and has compassion for her.

Does this widow know Jesus? Does she have faith? This is a gap in the text, and the fact that Luke doesn't mention it doesn't necessarily mean the answer is no. Yet it is significant that Luke emphasizes Jesus' compassion, rather than the recipient's faith. Raising her son truly is an act of compassion—for the widow, not just her son. Her son is the key to her survival in her own waning years, and losing him would mean a loss of her own life as well, because she has no one else—no husband and no other children—to care for her.

In light of Jesus' compassion for this widow, I think again of Juan José's story. My mind reels, crowded by the bucket lines of questions and doubts about people who are dying and their experience of faith. But I try to keep my eyes on the larger picture in Luke.

"You do not need to understand healing to be healed," writes Frederick Buechner, "or know anything about blessing to be blessed." I think the same is true of other people's faith. I don't need to understand it—whether this person is a man facing terminal cancer, a widow continuing in ministry without her spouse, or a widow grieving the loss of her only son.

Faith is less rationalization and more recognition. It is openness to the possibility of living and dying in a different way. Faith is seeing—it is a way to see the Jesus who comes to bring good news to the poor and proclaim release to the captives. I am ever grateful for the stories of the saints who have gone before us. I'm grateful for their expressions of compassion and of faith, and for the ways resurrection happens when we least expect it.