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## A "Blessed Rage" for Compassion

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**A sermon by the Rev. Theophus "Thee" Smith**  
**Pentecost 14C**

In the name of God: "Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend." Amen.  
(*The Hymnal*, 388, v.5; cf. Wallace Stevens "blessed rage for order" in the poem, "The Idea of Order at Key West" and David Tracy, *A Blessed Rage for Order*, 1975)

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In Atlanta they're called "Grandmothers for Peace." Over the years they've protested our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And they've also been arrested in local antiwar demonstrations here in Atlanta.

(<http://www.grannypeacebrigade.org/wordpress/2008/03/21/american-grannies-express-outrage-after-5-years-of-war/> ).

But around the country and abroad they're known as "Raging Grannies." If you search on the internet you can find both names listed: both Grandmothers for Peace International and Raging Grannies International. Each organization was started in the 1980s to protest the stockpiling of nuclear weapons in the Cold War against the Soviet Union. But as recently as this month one Raging Granny, Bonnie Block, was arrested in Madison, Wisconsin protesting the policies of Republican Governor Scott Walker ([http://www.democracynow.org/2013/8/19/editor\\_of\\_the\\_progressive\\_arrested\\_covering](http://www.democracynow.org/2013/8/19/editor_of_the_progressive_arrested_covering)).

Here's one description of the Raging Grannies in a town called Greater-Westerly, Wisconsin:

[Our] first Raging Grannies ... sprouted ... in 1986 in Victoria, [British Columbia, Canada], to sing satirical songs protesting nukes, militarism, racism, clear-cut logging, and corporate greed. [Now] There are now more than 60 gaggles of grannies throughout Canada, Europe, and the United States. [Come] Sing out your outrage with a sense of humor and a commitment to nonviolence. Gender, age, and musicianship [are] optional. One hour plus one performance per month. Watch for sightings. Join us! *Grrrramps* too. <http://phys.uri.edu/~nigh/RagingGrannies/FrontPage.html>

Now if you go to some of the Raging Grannies internet sites you may also see them dressed up in colorful clothing, or "in cloths that mock stereotypes of older women." The Wikipedia website describes them as "social justice activists ... [who include] peace and environmental issues" in their activism, and who typically write their song lyrics themselves, "putting their political messages to the tunes of well known songs." [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raging\\_Grannies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raging_Grannies)

Well, it's today's gospel story that raised up for me the image of these older women. It's true we're not told the age of the woman whom Jesus healed of her "ailment." She's described only as "crippled for eighteen years ... bent over and quite unable to stand up straight" (Lk. 13.11). More important is the way that Jesus justified healing her on the Sabbath, contrary to the religious practices of his day. It reminds me of something connected with the Grandmothers for Peace and the Raging Grannies. It's that phenomenon of knowing "right in the moment that it's happening" that you're being influenced by an effective maneuver, a skillful turn of phrase, and even a little bit of theater.

The way this works with the Grannies is that we're lured in by the stereotype of kindly old grandmothers, seemingly

harmless and ineffective. Then suddenly they're denouncing some issue, or getting arrested with a will of steel. That's when we know we've been taken-in, misled by our own false image of weak, older women.

Now let's notice how this works in today's gospel story when Jesus says:

ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?"

When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing (Lk. 13.14-17).

How effectively Jesus turned the crowd from one emotion to another: from the possibility that they might agree with their synagogue leader to be outraged with him, about Jesus' healing on the Sabbath. Instead they transition from sharing a sense of shame to compassion for the woman who was cured. And finally they are "rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing." Right here I'm reminded of more trivial examples of how our attitude gets changed by a smart management of crowd behavior. Here's a couple of more amusing examples.

Imagine you're in a shop or a store and you've been waiting for your order to be completed; waiting just long enough to start looking around. You're not quite impatient yet but you're getting there. That's when you notice a large red button in the waiting area under a colorful sign that reads: "'If you think you've been waiting too long for your order, push this button.' As you stand there considering your response you notice that the button is completely disconnected from anything electronic: it's just hanging there on the wall: it's a big toy.

That's when you realize you're being "'had:' it's a gag just to get your attention and manipulate you into a reasonable attitude of patience instead of aggravation, ill temper, or customer rage. And lo and behold: it works! Maybe with a bit of shame at being "'taken in' by the gag, you decide to monitor your behavior and not act-out in a childish fit of temper.

Or consider that voice recording when you're waiting on the telephone for a live person to come and assist you. You know, the operator's voice that says: "'Your call is important to us. At this time we are assisting other callers. When an associate becomes available you will receive the same quality attention and excellent service that our other callers are now receiving ...'

Well, you know the drill. Probably we are persuaded by that recording to moderate our impatience, even though in that very moment we know we're being "'had;' "'taken in' by effective wording or psychological skill. Now in today's gospel Jesus models for us a more important kind of crowd control.

How do you get people""people just like all of us who are capable of acting like a crowd at any given moment""how do you get us to have compassion for one another? In today's gospel Jesus does it with psychological skill, by countering the synagogue leader's Sabbath outrage with theological shaming. To repeat: he says to him:

"You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?"

And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" (Lk. 13.15-16)

It's a deft movement, isn't it?""effective in managing shame and rage. But beyond its psychological skill notice this theological feature as well: It's also, its own right, a type of holy rage on behalf of others. And Jesus not only excels in as a master prophet, but he requires it of us, his disciples, as well.

And finally he requires it of us even in relation to our enemies, even toward our opponents on the opposite side of any issue where we too are part of the crowd. We get a hint of this in today's psalm, Psalm 71, which we could imagine being prayed even by our enemies""even by our opponents on the opposite side of any issue where we too are part of a crowd. I invite us to imagine it being prayed by the synagogue leader when he got home after being shamed by Jesus that day, or by one of Jeremiah's opponents in his long career of prophetic denouncing of others, or even by Gov. Walker after his encounter with Raging Granny, Bonnie Block. [You can find the psalm there in your service booklet, at the bottom of page three, just as we chanted it earlier.]

In you, O LORD, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me.

Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.

Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.

For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O LORD, from my youth.

Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you (Ps. 71.1-6).

So here's the question, Christian friends, sisters and brothers, "'grannies and gramps.' And I leave it with you as an open question: If our opponents too can sincerely pray such a psalm'" and appeal to God with all the humility and devotion that we manage in our own prayers, would they not "'also receive the same quality of compassion and excellent care from God that we too are receiving in answer to our prayers?'" "compassion and care from One who, in the wisdom of God, "'makes the sun rise and the rain fall on the just and the unjust alike,' as Jesus declared in the Sermon on the Mount? (Matt. 5.45)

Isn't that the evidence we find in the ministry of Jesus himself toward those who repent and turn to God, and in the history of the church across the ages where so many sinners like us have become saints like we are called to be? Now I can't pretend this is easy. Lord knows, it's personal for me too. Even now my wife, Vida and I, are struggling with how to think about a young man, a 16 year-old, who shot and killed our own family member, also 16, in Toronto, Canada just this past Friday. We're not yet praying for the killer'" "for him or with him'" "as sincerely as we might. Yet over the next days and months we will be slowly coming to terms with our Lord's strict commandment to pray for him.

And here, we might add as we contemplate the carnage in Syria, Egypt, in Israel and Palestine, we Christians have a gospel conceit'" "really our Lord's promise, testament and treasure, that the answer to all that ceaseless violence is his commandment to:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you (Lk. 6.27-28).

This is the way, the scriptures tell us. And in this way we are called on to live out such a "'blessed rage for compassion.' Indeed, if only the Christians in these [our] lands might live out this gospel we might see the fulfillment of our Collect [opening prayer] appointed for today:

that your Church, O merciful God, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all peoples, to the glory of your name.

*"Book of Common Prayer, p. 232*

So finally friends, God charges us the way Jeremiah was charged, not to say, "'I'm only a child,' or "'I'm only one person,' or "'I can't do this yet,' or "'I can't manage that now.' Rather, in whatever crowd we find ourselves as disciples of Christ we are told, "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you ... See, today I appoint you ... to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

And so choose your prophetic image: whether Jeremiah, or our "'Grannies for Peace and Rage' as I like to call them, or Jesus himself throughout his full ministry'" "we too are called to practice a blessed rage of compassion on behalf of others; of whosoever. And remember this: in carrying out our call'" "in whatever mission field the Lord has planted us in, we're told that we too "'will receive the same quality of compassion, and the same excellent reward that comes with serving our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.'

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to the gospel and preaching of Jesus Christ, to the only wise God, be glory forever and ever. Amen! (adapt. Rom. 16.24-25; cf. Jude 1.24-25).