

"Our Awesome God"
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I once had a colleague, a very bubbly coordinator of children's ministries, who had a repertoire of upbeat songs she taught the elementary-aged kids, and the favorites were the ones that had hand motions to go with them.

One of these songs is called Our God is an Awesome God. The refrain goes: Our God is an awesome God, he reigns from heaven above, with wisdom, power and love, our God is an awesome God.

The kids liked the power part and made their best Superhero faces while they showed their strongman poses. It was so much fun to be with them while they sang with such glee.

Because, of course, our God IS an awesome God who is certainly powerful. Our God's power is even greater than the power of death. And so we rejoice in that.

We all know that there are many kinds of power out there in the world and that people - as well as institutions and even nations - use power in different ways and for different reasons.

One look at the news and all the posturing and power-mongering that goes on pretty much every day underscores this fact. Some of us may see this going on in our workplaces and even our families. Of course, there are - and this is, I think, key - many different motivations for the use of power.

One of the hallmarks of OUR awesome God is that our God's motivation for the use of power is not for power in and of itself, as a display, but is the result of compassion.

The stories in the Bible show over and over again how God sees us in our weakness, our frailty, our vulnerability and has compassion on us and comes to us to give us new life.

Compassion, also called tender mercy in the Bible, is a word that literally means "suffering with" and that "suffering with" is the motivator for God's powerful work in our world and in our lives.

And that powerful work is healing and restoration, binding up wounds, restoring dignity. Compassion is not a simple niceness. It is much stronger, and it is borne from holy creative fire.

That's what we see today in the Gospel. The story is simple, really. Jesus and his followers are just walking along - they're actually on a road trip - and they happen to come upon another group of people walking along. That group is a funeral procession. The only son of a widow has died and she is weeping - because now she has lost everything. It's not just that she has lost the people she loves. In her day, her loss of husband and only son meant that she was now completely vulnerable, with no protectors and no livelihood.

And Jesus looks at her, this unnamed woman whom he has simply come across, and really sees her. He really hears her weeping. He understands the situation at once. Her very survival depends on his response to her.

And his response is one born of compassion. Perhaps he was thinking about what he had said in his sermon on the plain at the beginning of his ministry: Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

And so he stops, and he turns aside to not only see and hear, but to act, there at the intersection of life and death, and he restores the woman's son to life with just a word. All it takes is a word, and that is enough to give new life.

And the people recognize that this is God's work. They understand that God's work is about giving life. They understand that this is how the Lord is known in this world, by his acts of compassion toward those who have desperate need.

And so they tell everyone what an awesome God they have, who brings life even to the lifeless, who sees the weeping and brings them joy. They know that the way you can tell if something is from God is if it brings life.

I can think of no better example in our own day of this kind of creative, born-of-fire compassion than the work of Becca Stevens, Episcopal priest and founder of Magdalen House and Thistle Farms, who was just this week named a CNN Hero, a distinction given to, as CNN frames it, "everyday people doing extraordinary things to change the world."

The people at CNN, like the people with the grieving widow, recognize the life-giving work of God through Thistle Farms toward those who have no livelihood and no protectors.

Many of you know about Stevens and about Thistle Farms, about the community of healing created to help women escape from a life of abuse, addiction, violence and prostitution. You may have met her when she visited here at St. Stephen's a few years ago, and we sell some of the Thistle Farms products in our book store.

It's an incredible enterprise with an incredible story - many incredible stories - of how weeping was turned into joy through the healing power of love. "Love Heals" is the tagline for Thistle Farms, and that is the truth. Love does heal.

Listen to this story by one of the women of Magdalene House from "Find Your Way Home," a book of meditations based on the Benedictine Rule, adapted for their community.

"Before I came to Magdalene (she writes), I used to walk [as in work] around the neighborhood where one of the communities was located. I was scared to go near the house and so were the other women [fellow prostitutes and drug dealers].

Then one day someone from Magdalene offered me a soda and a bag of chips and told me if I ever got tired there was a place for me [to come and rest]. ... It was the greatest example of hospitality I have ever witnessed. ... One day I crossed the street and made my way up the steps and knocked on the door. When I left two years later with a full-time job, a car, and an apartment, I thought about how it had all started with someone offering me a bag of chips."

And that is how this woman got her life back, how she got new life, born of the compassion of ordinary people like you and like me. The only superpower that Becca Stevens has is compassion and a willingness to use the power she has as a person who has a home and a good education, much like many of us, to offer new life through love. Her strength comes from the fire she has inside her to suffer with those in desperate need. It comes from her compassion.

This is something it behooves me to remember. In my "travels" around church, around the neighborhood, the grocery store, at the hospital or nursing facility where I'm just walking along, I often come across people who are weeping - if not on the outside, then on the inside.

I come across people who are grieving, who are sad, who are feeling defeated, lost, fragile. And I have the power to respond to them with compassion. To really see and hear them and to respond in a life-giving way. Sometimes all I need to do is say “Hello, I’m glad to see you.” Sometimes all I need to say is “Tell me how you are.” To say “God loves you just the way you are.” To say, “I understand.”

Sometimes all it takes is a word, or the simple offer of a soda and a bag of chips, to make a difference in someone’s life, to bring joy where there has been weeping. We all have that power. Not just God, not just Jesus, not just a clergy person. You have that power, too.

You have the power to bring life, and that can change the world. That’s pretty awesome.