

June 6, 2010
 Homily, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Chicago
 Lectionary 10, Year C
 Pr. Benjamin M. Stewart

I generally do not like to cite Greek or Hebrew words from the texts in sermons, partly because... I'm not very good at it. But this week a Greek word that is both fun and nearly impossible to pronounce convinced me to violate my own rule: *splagchnizomai*.

Splagchnizomai has to do with, let's just say it, intestines. Literally, it means the *yearning of one's bowels*. It's a word about visceral reaction—from your viscera. Today we might call it a *gut reaction*, a *yearning gut reaction*.¹

The author of Luke's Gospel uses this word only three times in the entire Gospel, and today's use is the only occurrence when it refers directly to Jesus' own... intestines, or guts.

What happens is Jesus is conducting his wandering teaching ministry with his disciples and a large crowd following him, when their Christian education crowd meets another crowd: a funeral procession. And it is a funeral procession for a death that is itself also life-threatening. A widow is grieving the death of her only son: which is to say in this patriarchal society, that she is losing her income, her livelihood, her standing in society, her retirement, her—in the truest sense of the word—"social security."

This story eventually includes the raising of this young man from the dead, but notice that it is to this older woman, this vulnerable widow now on the periphery of society and stability—it is to her—that Jesus *splagchnizomais*. Our translation says Jesus "had compassion on her" but the language, as we know, is really more earthy, gutsy, visceral. Jesus' gut-reaction goes out toward this widow, and it is her that he approaches and to whom he first speaks. The raising of this man from the dead is overshadowed and bookended first by Jesus' *splagchnizomai* to this widow, and then by Jesus' giving this vulnerable widow some of her world's stability back.

There are two other times in Luke when someone *splagchnizomais*. Both of them are in parables that Jesus tells. The first is when a Samaritan sees a man beaten, abandoned, and left for dead by the side of the road. At the sight of this road-kill of a man, unlike the others who walk by on the other side, Jesus says the Samaritan *splagchnizomais*, and, as Luke writes, following that gut reaction, he

*"went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii [days wages], gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.""*²

This instant gut reaction is pricey, and goes on for days.

The other parable in which Jesus uses *splagchnizomai* in Luke is when the father of a household sees far off the son of his who had disowned him, who had taken his inheritance and squandered it all and had been living with the pigs, and was now coming home looking for even more handouts from his father. At this sight—of the prodigal son who had squandered everything, smelling like a pig sty, coming home for more—the father *splagchnizomais*, Jesus says:

*"he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.... and said... "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"*³

At least two things are apparent about the *splagchnizomais* in Luke's Gospel: First, these gut reactions are responses to people whose identity or dignity or well-being or life is slipping away. Whether it is a result of their own choices, or the social structures around them, or the randomness of the universe, these three figures—the widow whose son has died, the

¹ See Brian Stoffregen, CrossMarks website. <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke7x11.htm>

² Luke 10.34-35

³ Luke 15.20, 22-24

man left for dead by the road, the prodigal son—have all been pushed to a tenuous and vulnerable place, to the edge of the world, and to someone in each of these texts it is a “kick-in-the-gut” to see these people there.

Second, these instant gut reactions, in these texts, also have an enduring, long-haul, character, too. There’s a whole party to plan for the Prodigal Son, and the entire household has to be rearranged to make room for him, The Good Samaritan not only got the mugging victim emergency shelter and care, but also paid for more in advance, and arranged to come back and not abandon this victim. Jesus not only consoled a widow in her grief but also provided for her well-being far into the future.

In our cultures, when we talk about gut reactions, we often talk about them as something that is the opposite of the way *splagchnizomai* unfolds in Luke. We often talk about gut reactions as both relatively unreliable and instantaneous and fleeting.

There’s another way we may often talk differently about our guts these days. When we talk about shaping or forming our guts we’re probably usually talking about something we do (or don’t do!) at the gym, or through our diet—not something that has to do with social well-being, or the healing of violence, or mercy. On all these counts, our cultures may have something to learn.

Some of you know I’ve been fascinated by a study certain groups of monks who practice a type of contemplation that holds one thing after another in consciousness and attends to it with compassion. A study of these monks took a sample of monks who had been practicing this type of meditation for at least 10,000 hours as well as a control group of the rest of us, hooked them up to fMRI machines and showed them a series of images, with a number of images of what most of us normally find revolting: disfigured and badly wounded bodies, blighted landscapes, dangerous animals. The brain scans showed that while most of our brains, upon seeing such images, light up like the emergency exits lights in the aisle of an airplane: we—in a precognitive split-second—want to get out of there fast. We are revolted. But the monks’ brain scans looked very different: their gut reaction was also a powerful “kick in the gut” but it was, in Greek, an image of *splagchnizomai*, a yearning toward these vulnerable people, animals, places—a gut reaction of compassion and mercy—leaning toward them and not away from them—that had been partly shaped and formed through years of religious practice.

It turns out that *splagchnizomai*—gut reactions—contrary to our popular conceptions, can be 1) learned, formed 2) can draw us into long-haul commitments and 3) teach us the most true, reliable, and important things we will ever know.

Maybe these texts call us to a sort of gut-check. When have we known *splagchnizomai* in the past days?

- Talking to a friend going through a difficult time?
- Caring for an animal?
- Singing a hymn in church?
- Seeing pictures of the oil spill?
- Yearning for healthy, mutual care in a relationship?
- Finding a miracle in the beauty of Lake Michigan or a great spreading tree or tending your garden?
- Serving food at a shelter or pantry?
- Reconciling with an enemy?

It does seem that quite a number of people find their way to Holy Trinity as part of their own *splagchnizomai*—following their gut into a new venture in health care, or music, or education and research, or law, or even romance, or even simply journeying—on a gut feeling—out of something demeaning or empty toward God-only-knows. It’s gutsy place.

These scripture texts today, and the meal that we eat here, remind us that we not only share the breath of the spirit, but that we share in the Body of Christ, and our own bodies share in the *splagchnizomai* of Christ, who is shaping us, forming us, to behold this world in the yearning, the compassion, with which God has beheld it since long before we were born.

Like those monks who practiced for more than 10,000 hours, we come back to the gather around this table, to receive the gift of mercy, to know what it tastes like, so that God might train our guts to know it and yearn for it when we walk out of here.

But we have been warned. Jesus has show us: these gut reactions can be costly, and can change the course of our whole lives.

The funeral procession that Jesus met that was a march of despair, the violence that left the man abandoned by the side of the road waiting for a Samaritan, the prodigal son staggering home looking for a handout but needing a kind of mercy that was even more costly... all of these things we still encounter on our paths in this world today, and if we pay attention, our guts maybe responding like the very Body of Christ, yearning for mercy, for justice, for new life.

What the world often writes off as a shallow gut reaction or a guilty kick-in-the-gut may be, Jesus says elsewhere, the birth pangs of a new world of mercy, love, and life being born among us.