

Compassion

(Second in a series of messages on the theme 'Living in the Kingdom: Values that Matter')

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Psalm 116:1-7, Mark 1:40-42, Luke 10: 25-37

If there is one characteristic that stands out in the person of our Lord, it is his compassion. We see that compassion on display time and time again in the gospel accounts. It was out of compassion, says scripture, that Jesus fed the 5,000. It was out of compassion for the widow of Nain that he raised her son from the dead. It was out of compassion that Jesus reached out to the lost and to the lonely and to the outcast. It was out of compassion that Jesus healed one such outcast - a leper who came to him looking for help (Mark 1:40-42).

"Filled with compassion," says Mark, "Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man." The Greek word for "compassion" is *splanchnizomai*, which literally means *"from the spleen, out of the bowels..."* It's kind of interesting - in our culture we talk about loving from the "heart." In biblical times, they talked about loving from the "bowels" -- which is to say that compassion is a visceral thing -- it is something that is felt in the gut - it is an emotion of love and concern experienced at the gut-level.

To have compassion is to genuinely feel for another, so much so that their suffering in some sense becomes our own. That meaning is captured in the two roots of our English word "compassion:" *com* (with) and *passion* (suffering). Compassion is to "suffer with..."

And yet I fear too many of us are losing our capacity to do just that. So vast is the need, so many are the appeals, we can quickly get overwhelmed and stop caring. There is even a term for that: "Compassion Fatigue." TV and the various media contribute to that malady, for they have a way of overloading us with pictures and stories of suffering to the point where we are no longer moved by it. Overexposure leads to desensitization. You and I lose our capacity to feel; but the day we are unable to shed a tear for suffering humanity is the day we have lost our humanity. Lord, preserve us from that!

But compassion is more than just an emotion. It finds expression in taking some kind of concrete action, even if that action is just being present to another.

I think of the farmer who was out plowing his field one spring morning. The spring thaw had just occurred, and there were many muddy valleys in the field. Eventually, his tractor became stuck in the mud. The harder he tried, the deeper he became stuck.

Finally, he went over to a neighbor to ask for help. The neighbor farmer came over and looked over the situation. He shook his head, and then said: *"It doesn't look good. I'll tell you what. I'll give it a try -- pulling you out. But if we can't get it out, I'll come sit in the mud with ya."*

"Mud-sitting" is sometimes what is required of us -- being present to another in need without necessarily fixing anything.

Henri Nouwen, who wrote a number of books about ministry and the spiritual life, talked about the importance of trying to enter into another person's pain without necessarily having to fix it. He says:

"... when we honestly ask ourselves which persons in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen to rather share any pain and touch one's wounds with a gentle and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief or bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is the friend who cares..." [from Out of Solitude]

Sometimes all we can do is sit in the mud with a friend and simply be present to him or her ... that can be the most important thing. That's compassion. That's caring. It is not so much what you say – it's just being there.

If however, we can somehow alleviate suffering through some other action, then act we must. Compassion is more than pity – it leads to deeds of mercy.

The Good Samaritan in Jesus' famous parable was not only moved with pity, but resolved to do something about a man's suffering. He bandaged the man's wounds, took him to the nearest inn, and paid for his stay. That's compassion!

Many of us may relate more to the Sunday school student, whose third grade class was studying the parable of the Good Samaritan. The teacher asked Sally, *"What would you do if you saw someone who was beaten and bloody lying alongside the road?"* *"I think I would throw up!"* she said.

The thing is, you and I don't always want to get that involved with wounded people. It's one thing to feel for another, it's another thing to act upon those feelings. Showing compassion is costly. It involves interruptions, inconveniences. It interferes with our cherished plans for privacy and self-indulgence. It requires our time, our attention, and our generous giving. And quite frankly, you and I are not always prepared to pay the price. So we can make up all kinds of excuses not to care.

We can be like W.C. Fields who while bedridden near the end of his life was visited by a close friend. The friend found Fields frantically reading the Bible. *"What are you doing?"* Fields replied, *"Looking for loopholes."*

We, too, want to find some support for our system of excuses. We know we should exercise compassion, but we look for loopholes, seeking justification for not having to take action.

Does this get too close to home?

I am always uncomfortable with the story of the Good Samaritan because I see too much of myself in the priest or the Levite in the story.

Let's revisit the story with a little imagination. A man was beaten by robbers and left to die. A priest came by on the road, no doubt on his way to the temple in Jerusalem where he would officiate at his religious ceremonies.

The wounded man was elated at the sight of him: *"Thank goodness it's a priest; here is a good religious man who will help me."*

The priest sees him and thinks to himself:

Oh the poor fellow. Lucky it didn't happen to me. Had I come through just a few minutes earlier he could have been me. I'd like to help the poor man but who knows, the same robbers who got him may be lurking a few feet away and they just might knock me off too. And I do need to think of my family. And the temple needs me too. I've got a church service to run. Surely I'll reach more people in my sermon on love than I would by helping this man and missing church altogether. Maybe as a result of my sermon a Good Samaritan Society will be established. Who is this guy anyway? For all I know he could be a crook or a drunk who ran his head into a tree...

So the priest – the ministry professional - takes a wide detour around the man, being careful not to get too close. If you get too close you have got to get involved. And he didn't want to pay the price.

The wounded man was about to lose all hope when a Levite--a lay leader at the temple came by -- another religious man. *"Thank goodness this man will help me. Surely he knows and practices the law found in Leviticus "love thy neighbor as thyself." Surely he will stop and treat me with a little kindness."*

But the Levite is running late--for he must catch the priest's sermon on love at the temple (after all, he must grow in faith). And he's got money for the temple treasury; how foolish it would be for it to fall in the hands of robbers. *"I wish I could but..."*

And he too makes a wide detour around the wounded man and doesn't want to get too close, because he also does not want to pay the price to help.

The story does cut close to home – and, quite frankly, the Lord, in telling this story, meant to disturb us.

How can we cultivate this quality of compassion in our lives? Let me mention three things:

First, you and I must realize that though we cannot take care of everybody, we can take care of somebody, and that somebody is usually the person we run into or who runs into us as we go about our daily routine. These are the people whom we may think of at first as "interruptions," or as "inconveniences," but they are, in fact, the very people whom the Lord would have us help. They are directly on our path. They may be at our very doorstep. We can try to avoid them, as we so often do, taking a detour or going out the back door. But the lesson of the Good Samaritan would teach us to do otherwise. No, we cannot take care of everybody, but we can take care of somebody, and God makes it pretty clear to us, if we are at all alert, who that somebody is.

Secondly, you and I will grow in compassion when you and I make a sincere attempt to put ourselves in another person's shoes. Compassion arises out of understanding. I wonder if we lack compassion because we don't do the work that is necessary to truly understand the situation of another – what is it that is causing them to suffer. We simply don't fully appreciate what a suffering person is going through.

There is a Jewish story of a young man who visited his rabbi and became so overwhelmed by the emotional experience that he cried out, *"Rabbi, I love you dearly."*

The rabbi, who was both touched and amused by his student's sincerity, asked him, *"Tell me, my son, you say that you love me, but where do I hurt? What ails me?"*

To this the perplexed man responded, *"I do not know where you hurt, Rabbi, but nevertheless I love you dearly."*

The rabbi then replied, *"But how can you say you love me when you do not even know where I hurt and what brings me pain?"*

If we would have compassion, we must seek to understand the situation of those who suffer. We must attempt to put ourselves in their shoes, to put ourselves in their world, to see things through their eyes, so that we understand where they hurt and what brings them pain.

How can we cultivate the virtue of compassion in our lives? By being alert to the need right in front of us. By making an effort to understand the other, trying to imagine what it is like in other's shoes. And finally, by appreciating more fully the Lord's compassion for you and for me in ministering to us in our own pain and hurt. We are all the recipients of Jesus' amazing love.

Here is a powerful thought: *Where would you and I be today if Jesus, in seeing a broken, bleeding dying human race alongside the road, had chosen to walk by on the other side using the excuse that he had more important things to do for God than get himself nailed to a cross?*ⁱ

We are all the beneficiaries of the Lord's costly compassion. He saved us at the expense of his own life! If we know Christ to be our Savior, you and I can say with the psalmist:

*The Lord is gracious and righteous;
our God is full of compassion.
The Lord protects the simplehearted;
when I was in great need, he saved me
Be at rest once more, O my soul
For the Lord has been good to you...*

If God has saved us in Jesus Christ, and has put our soul at rest and has been good to us in our need, then surely we can pass on his compassion to others, treating our fellow human beings with love and respect, blessing rather than cursing, healing instead of hurting.

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God..."

Once upon a time a certain man fell into a pit and could not get himself out. A therapeutic person came by and said, *"I really feel your pain down there."* A common-sense person came by and said, *"It was inevitable someone would fall in there eventually."* A fundamentalist said, *"Only bad people fall into pits"* even as a Calvinist swung by and said, *"We all deserve our pits."* A mathematician came by and calculated the odds of falling into the pit, and a self-centered person exclaimed, *"You haven't seen anything until you've seen my pit!"* An optimist saw the man and said, *"Could be worse"* even as a pessimist rejoined, *"It will get worse before it's over."* Then Jesus came by, dropped down onto his belly in the slippery mud around the pit, reached out a pierced hand, and pulled the man free. And this Jesus says to us, *"Go and do likewise."* Amen.

ⁱ Rev. Daniel T. Hans, sermon: "Some of My Best Excuses," Gettysburg Presbyterian Church, May 27, 2001