

Sowing Seeds of Compassion

John Wilkinson
Third Presbyterian Church
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James 3:13 – 4:3 and Mark 9:30-37

Sometimes you ask me where I find the bulletin cover quotations. I have a file; actually I have several files. One is an old-fashioned manila file folder, where I place photocopied paragraphs, things written down on napkins or the backs of envelopes and the like. There is an electronic file on my computer where I send myself memos, or cut and paste from any number of a dozen articles I read every day. Sometimes you send me quotations – sayings, poems, snippets of prose. I know it's worth the effort when I walk into a home and see a bulletin cover "magnetted" on a refrigerator door, or find a quotation underlined as you walk out the door after church. Sometimes they refer directly to the sermon. Sometimes they provide another intimation on the theme. Sometimes, like a children's sermon, they resonate more deeply than the sermon itself. I try never to take that personally!

Rarely do I make direct reference to a cover quotation, but I will today. The late priest Henri Nouwen, who taught us so much about so many things, wrote this; "Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human."

Compassion. Its meaning captures its central importance to faith, and its challenge. "To suffer with." We have sanitized it a bit, to something like care for or care about. That's pretty good in and of itself, and sorely needed, but at its heart, "compassion" takes us deeper into our spiritual journey and deeper into human connection.

And we do it, do we not? And often we do it without notice, without attention. We suffer with our children when they fall on the playground and skin their knee, or crash a bike and break their collarbone. We suffer with them when they are cut from a team or fail a quiz or are not asked to the prom. We suffer with our parents when a partner dies or when a cancer diagnosis is identified or when first an event is forgotten and then an experience and then a relationship. We suffer with those closest to us when a job goes sour or a relationship is fractured.

And we suffer ourselves, all of these things that others suffer, and what we hope for, what we pray for, is that there will be people to suffer with us, to demonstrate compassion to us and

with us, so that the load is lightened just a little bit and we sense we are not alone in our suffering. This may be pity. It may be sympathy or empathy. All matter and all are important. But this is something even deeper, this compassion business, this call to suffer with, to being fully immersed in the condition of being human.

There was a wedding here yesterday where I was privileged to preside. A wonderful young couple ready to face the adventure and journey of life together. In the service we shared from Paul's letter to the Colossians. Clothe yourselves, Paul said. Clothe yourselves with compassion, meekness, kindness, humility, patience. Clothe yourselves with compassion. What would it look like for a newly married couple to be clothed in compassion, so that when suffering comes, and it will, they will have someone to suffer with them? What would it look like for all of us to wear compassion, to be clothed in it, for Paul was not writing with a wedding in mind? What would that look like?

Jesus knew. He continues to tell his followers, as he does this morning in our small portion of Mark's gospel, that he will be betrayed, and suffer, and killed. He tells them that, over and over. They will not believe it. How can one so young and vibrant and popular talk about his own death that way? So they dismiss him, or they ignore him. But he knew. He knew what he was facing, and that as in his life he was clothed with compassion – caring for the grieving, the possessed, the prostitute and tax collector, the bleeding, the outcast, the foreigner – he would ultimately suffer himself for these convictions and those connections.

One can't embrace the outsider without realizing the consequences. And Jesus did. What does that look like? Well, first, he establishes the conditions, the parameters. What he says, essentially, is that this compassion business won't win you any awards, not in this life, anyway. To suffer with others, he says, near and far, means that you must put yourself last, and serve. That is sobering. That is the gospel. And it's hard, because there is a strong tradition in which many, including women and those with little access to prominence, have been conditioned to become subservient, to put their own needs and dreams and desires on the backburner to care for others. And that may be, but if it's so, it's true for all of us.

And yet I don't think that's entirely what Jesus is saying. There is an easy adage that is true, that "one savior is enough." So while we are called to sacrifice, to lay down our life for our friends, to mourn with those who mourn, to clothe ourselves with compassion, we are called to do more than that, and no one group or gender has a monopoly on that call, or is exempt from it.

And we don't want to suffer from "compassion fatigue," what is called "secondary traumatic stress," whereby we give so much of ourselves that our resources become depleted, for ourselves and others, and we have nothing left to give. Odds are that as we care for others we will need to become aware of what it does to us. If you are aware, you can find support and be

mindful of your own needs. As you care for others, as you offer compassion, you can receive care and receive compassion. It is possible to practice compassion and receive it. In fact, it is necessary to live fully as a human, to do both. And it is our calling.

What does that look like? Jesus tells us. In fact, he shows us. There is a child present during this conversation. I want to know the circumstances, of course. Whose child was this and how did she or he get there? Jesus takes notice, and picks the child up. This was radical behavior, though we don't inherently know it in the 21st century. Children were non-people, less than people, with no cultural or social standing. So when Jesus picks this child up, it's startling. When he says that when we welcome a child, we welcome him, it's more than that. It's revolutionary. It is true compassion, suffering with one whom society has discarded simply because of who they are.

That is what we are called to do. Clothe ourselves with compassion for the voiceless, for those without access, for those for whom no one will speak up, those who are not likable or lovable.

It will be difficult each week until November 2016 not to connect this conversation with an election conversation, and sometimes I will succeed and sometimes I will not. But I was intrigued this week when Bernie Sanders, who says that he is "proud to be Jewish" but is not "particularly religious," spoke at Liberty University, which is clearly proud to be evangelical Christian and *is* particularly religious. What ensued was a respectful, as far as I could tell, dialogue, that focused, without saying it, on this question. What does compassion look like? Sanders argued that we have an obligation to act on behalf of the poor. His was a political argument, and partisan, with policies and proposals that go along with it.

My point here is simply to ask the question, not liberal or conservative, Democratic or Republican – what would compassion look like in our culture, where we welcome, in Jesus' terms, the poor, the outcast, the refugee, the immigrant, the one who believes differently from us, looks and behaves differently from us, and by so doing, welcome Jesus himself. All the while sharing compassion with those nearest us, our loved ones, suffering with them as they suffer, and receiving compassion when we need it most.

That is the seed planted in us, today and every day, to hear this gospel, to know where it will take us, and to follow anyway, risks and all.

Maya Angelou wrote that "My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style." I don't know about the style part, but she reminds us that we only thrive as we care for others, that when we refuse to welcome, to suffer with, we shut our own spirits down.

Nelson Mandela, no theologian, said that “Our human compassion binds us the one to the other - not in pity or patronizingly, but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future.”

That means that as we clothe ourselves with compassion, we clothe ourselves more so with hope. This is a garden where there is room for more than one seed – compassion, hope, and so much more. Amen.