

19. COMPASSION: THE HEART OF JESUS' MINISTRY



Focus: Jesus was not primarily a teacher of correct beliefs or right morals. He was a teacher of a way that transforms people from legalistic rule-followers into compassionate disciples who put people first.

COMPASSION ABOVE ALL THINGS

Considering the witness of the gospels, you wouldn't be thought strange to claim that the essence of Jesus' ministry might be distilled down into one word: *compassion*. The three synoptic gospels record Jesus identifying the most important commandment – and he was not the only one in his time to quote Deuteronomy in lifting up the priorities of loving “God with your whole heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Jesus made it clear throughout his ministry that the standard of behavior he expected of his followers was not only love of neighbor, but love of outcasts and enemies, as well – genuine love, acted upon even at a cost and risk to oneself.

To understand Jesus' commitment to the practice of compassion, it helps to know a little about the world into which he was born. Roman annexation of Palestine in 63 B.C.E. created an unsettling mix of religious, political, and economic conflict. With the Roman presence affecting almost every aspect of life, the task of remaining a faithful Jew became increasingly challenging. The response of some Jews in Jesus' time was to commit themselves to the Torah's holiness code and submit to God's mandate to “...be holy as I the Lord your God am holy.” (*Leviticus 19.2*)

Unfortunately, the concept of holiness carried with it the notion of achievable perfection. As a result, this particular group of Jews emphasized the portions of the Law that stressed separateness. Jewish life was polarized into clean and unclean, pure and defiling, sacred and profane. People, too, were divided into categories of clean or unclean, righteous or sinner.

Jewish movements like the Essenes, copyists and creators of the “Dead Sea Scrolls,” are thought to be an extreme example of this philosophy. They formed an isolated, monastic-like community in the desert, completely separating themselves from others. Perhaps most familiar to readers of the New Testament as practitioners of the holiness code were the Pharisees. Although they are represented as his main opposition in the Gospels, Jesus identified with the Pharisees more than with the Sadducees. While the Sadducees were the literalist Priests bound to the temple, the Pharisees were out in the countryside

doing their best to make Judaism “doable” for the people of the land. Jesus, however, pushed beyond even their comfort level in making Jewish practice and principles accessible. The stress on adherence to purity laws and refusing table fellowship with sinners by some Pharisees evidently created a large group of outcasts and set the stage for the Gospel writers to portray them as Jesus’ villainous opposition.

Into what was a rigid, legalistic environment for many stepped Jesus, flying in the face of the Pharisees’ prime directive: separation from anything unclean. Although Jesus identified with the Pharisees who were trying to humanize the law, he still parted company with them on their interpretation of holiness and their strict adherence to separation. Jesus’ “M.O.” was healing on the Sabbath and dining with sinners and outcasts. He invited his disciples to look beyond the conventional attitudes of his day and see how the way we treat one another is more important than the way we adhere to a set of rigid rules.

Far from ignoring the law or possessing a “lack of moral standards,” such behavior would include giving up things like oppression, exploitation, coercion, and greed – not to mention the tyranny of having to believe what is “correct.” By putting behavior ahead of belief in a hierarchy of values, Jesus’ disciples are held to a standard that transcends the rules. Followers of Jesus are duty-bound to treat their fellow human beings with kindness, respect, and mercy – no matter the circumstance. Our actions of love are more important than the expression of our beliefs or keeping of the law.

Although the Gospel of John is clearly not a literal recounting of Jesus’ life, the emphasis of John’s interpretation offers us a picture of discipleship that centers around experience of God, not information about God. It’s not about faith (the word doesn’t even appear in the book) or right beliefs, but about “knowing” God. Throughout Hebrew scripture, to “know” God is to have an intimate experience of the Divine. Adam “knew” his wife and she conceived. Likewise, from John’s perspective, to know God is to enter into intimacy with God.

Similarly, our word “compassion” comes from the Latin and literally means “to bear or feel the suffering” of another – not just intellectually, but viscerally. Language scholars point out that the Hebrew and Aramaic root word for compassion (*racham*) is a plural form of the singular noun “womb.” From the singular noun “womb” you move to the plural “compassion.” Jesus makes the abstract notion of a plural womb concrete by modeling and teaching the nourishing, life-giving, all-embracing practice of compassion above all things. If laws, rules or customs get in the way of acting with compassion, then away with them.

NOT GUILTY BY REASON OF COMPASSION

On a certain Sabbath Jesus and his disciples were hungry. Since they happened to be passing through grain fields at the time, they plucked some heads of grain to eat along the way. Evidently, some Pharisees saw this and accused them of breaking the Sabbath (Matthew 12). Although work on the Sabbath was strictly prohibited by the holiness code, Jesus appealed to a familiar story in Jewish history, illustrating how even David did what was unlawful when he and his companions were hungry (1 Samuel 21). “You just don’t get it, do you?” Jesus continued. “God wants compassion, (*eleos* in Greek), not sacrifice. If you understood that you wouldn’t be condemning the guiltless.”

Jesus continued on his way and came to a synagogue. The Pharisees followed him inside where the text says there was a man with a deformed hand. The cynical have suggested that the Pharisees brought the hapless man with them in yet another effort to catch Jesus out. When the Pharisees asked Jesus if it was lawful to heal the man on the Sabbath, Jesus replied, “What if one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath; wouldn’t you lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep? Of course it’s lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”

Jesus’ subsequent healing of the man on the Sabbath was another example of his transcending the holiness code with a higher law, the law of compassion. In effect, Jesus said to the self-righteous religious busybodies, “You can take your holiness codes, your strict observance of the law, your sense of righteousness and you can, well, you know what you can do with them!”

Although the Pharisees were quick to pronounce Jesus’ guilt, a jury of Jesus’ peers would likely have rendered a different verdict: “not guilty by reason of compassion.” The point of the law is not the law, but people. The law is a human attempt to express an orderliness in life – without which human life in community would be impossible. If the rules get in the way of a single healing, life-giving, compassionate act, they’re not to be followed.

Does that mean you’re only being compassionate if you’re breaking some law or code? No, but it does mean wrestling with what’s really important in life – and to know that putting people first is not without cost. Jesus’ overturning of the tables in the temple was a passionate criticism of the Sadducees’ legalistic temple operations. That along with his regular flaunting of the holiness codes were in no small part a contributing factor in his eventual arrest and execution.

THE FIRST SIGN OF CIVILIZATION

Jesus called the disciples to see beyond the conventional attitudes of his day that they might “be compassionate as God in heaven is compassionate.” (Luke 6:36) He was not primarily a teacher of either correct beliefs or right morals but of authentic human relationships. Instead, Jesus demonstrated a way or path that lead to the transformation of those whom he encountered.

Compassion is the way of transformation – for both the one suffering and for the oppressor. To be compassionate is to recognize our utter interdependence in God's world and to see another person, be they stranger or outcast, as sister or brother.

“Every time you meet another human being you have the opportunity. It's a chance at [compassion.] For you will do one of two things, then. Either you will build them up, or you will tear them down. Either you will acknowledge that they are, or you will make him sorry that they are — sorry, at least, that they are there, in front of you. You will create, or you will destroy. And the things you dignify or deny are God's own property. They are made, each one of them, in God's own image. Turn your face truly to the human before you and let her, for one pure moment, shine. Think her important, and then she will suspect that she is fashioned of God.”

– Walter Wangerin, Jr.
Ragman and Other Cries of Faith (HarperSanFrancisco: 1984) pp. 129-130.

Perhaps voicing Ezekiel's sentiment: “O God, give us hearts of flesh to replace our hearts of stone” (Ezekiel 36:26) is an apt reminder to go beyond being open *even* to those who seem unlovable to being open *especially* to those who seem unlovable, needful, or who are excluded for whatever reason.

A student of anthropologist Margaret Mead once asked her to describe the earliest sign of civilization in a given culture. The young student expected the noted student of cultures to say that clay pots or crude axes or grinding stones were the first clues of civilization. Dr. Mead's answer was “a healed femur,” the human thighbone. She went on to explain that a healed femur indicated that someone cared. Someone had to do the injured person's hunting and gathering until the leg healed. The evidence of compassion, she said, is the first sign of civilization.

CHANGED IN AN INSTANT

The Bible is mostly suspicious of people with resources and power – because the tendency is that once one has wealth and power, it's easy to forget and become insulated from people who are in need.

Albert Schweitzer said, “Concern for people is the beginning of hope.” And when I find somebody hopeless I conclude that they are not very much concerned about anybody. Isn't it funny that the great harbingers of hope in our time have been the Teresas, and the Kings, and the Romeros, and the Gandhis? Good heavens of all the people who had a right to resign from hope, maybe Schweitzer was right, “Concern for other people is the beginning of hope.”

– Harrell Beck in an unpublished sermon, *The Joys of Liberation Preaching*

Stephen Covey, author of the best seller, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, relates an encounter on a subway in New York one morning. People were sitting quietly, reading newspapers, lost in thought, or resting with their eyes closed. At the next station, a man and his children entered the subway car. The children were so loud and rambunctious that instantly the whole climate changed. The man sat down next to Covey and closed his eyes, apparently oblivious to the situation. The children were yelling back and forth, throwing things, even grabbing people's papers. It was very disturbing – and yet the man next to Covey did nothing. It was difficult not to feel irritated. How could this man be so insensitive as to let his children run wild like that and do nothing about it, taking no responsibility at all? It was easy to see that everyone else on the subway felt irritated, too.

Finally, with as much patience and restraint as he could muster, Covey turned to the man and said, "Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you couldn't control them a little more?" The man lifted his gaze as if to come to a consciousness of the situation for the first time and said softly, "Oh, you're right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don't know what to think, and I guess they don't know how to handle it either." Covey was stunned.

"Can you image how I felt at that moment?" he asks. His understanding shifted. He relates, "Suddenly I saw things differently, and because I saw differently, I thought differently, I felt differently, I behaved differently. My irritation vanished. My heart was filled with the man's pain. Feelings of sympathy and compassion flowed freely." "Your wife just died? I'm so sorry. Can you tell me about it? What can I do to help?" Everything changed in an instant.

– adapted from Stephen Covey
The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, (Fireside, NY: 1989) p.30-31

All of this is about the virtue that Marcus Borg says is the acid test for our faith – the virtue of compassion. The way of Christ – the way of compassion – is creative, healing, and life-giving. To be compassionate is to recognize our utter interdependence in God's world. As T.S. Elliot put it,

"There is always something we're ignorant of about another person. And often it turns out that the one thing we're ignorant of about another person was the most important."

To see another person, even a stranger, as a sister or brother, is the beginning of compassion and the embracing of what Jesus preached and practiced as the primary quality of a life centered in God.

DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)

DVD Chapter 2:

Share how Carcaño's story of experiencing her mother's compassion compares to Jesus' expression of compassion.

What does the story of the woman with the flow of blood and the power "going out of" Jesus say about our call to compassion?

How would you describe the call to compassion as a "Summons?"

DVD Chapter 3:

According to Jesus' message to John the Baptist, what are some of the practical expressions of compassion being practiced?

Jesus a law-breaker?! Explain.

What does the story of the woman with the flow of blood say about Jesus' opinion of the 1st Century Jewish purity laws?

Spong says that, according to Jesus, the Sabbath was created for a particular purpose. Explain.

DVD Chapter 4:

What is the secret name of God?

When Brueggemann says, “When that kind of body and that kind of presence walks into pain, it has transformative power,” what are the implications for us?

Compare the two kinds of compassion that Carcaño describes.

What are some of the ways in which a society is put together that might “profoundly affect the lives of people?”

How might Jesus’ “Family Values” be an expression of compassion?

DVD Chapter 5:

How does compassion “evolve?”

SPIRITPRACTICE:

“Workteams” with Dr. Marcus Borg and Habitat for Humanity

Questions for Personal Reflection:

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material in this session?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION:

Make the John Bell/Graham Moule song "The Summons" part of your devotional and worship repertoire:

Words and music are available from the Wild Goose Resource Group (<http://www.iona.org.uk>) and is #2130 in the United Methodist hymnal supplement, "The Faith We Sing" (www.cokesbury.com) An instrumental version can be heard on Barb Catlin's CD, "The Summons," available at www.livingthequestions.com. Lyrics by John Bell and Graham Moule, © 1987, The Iona Community.

Be sure to follow up on this session's theme with Session 19's *Living it Out:* "Jesus: Holy Compassion," distributed by your facilitator.