

THE LOVE CALLED COMPASSION

Psalm 145: 1-9; Luke 10: 25-37

1) Martha had been part of the soup kitchen crew for over 20 years now. She still remembered the circumstances that got her involved. The church was looking for more volunteers. She wanted to help, but the idea of coming into contact with people off the streets, people who were dirty, smelly and rough... it was just not her thing. But then one week a few of the volunteers were unavailable. Martha was asked if she could fill in just this once. Reluctantly, she agreed. As expected, once people started coming in, Martha witnessed exactly what she had been wary of. It was the men, especially. There was one, in particular, a man called Leroy. Martha couldn't tell how old he was. But Leroy was loud. And when he came up close to be served, the smell of him was ghastly. Martha was trying to be polite, but it was hard.

Once everyone was served, the protocol was that servers sat down and ate with those they served. Martha was hoping to avoid having to do that, but the other servers kept nudging her to go find a seat. The only seat Martha could find was the seat next to Leroy. No surprise that others didn't claim that one. Martha took a deep breath and went to sit down.

And that's when it happened. It wasn't Leroy's loud talking with spittle flying out of his mouth that did it. It wasn't the mess all around his plate and on his shirt that did it. It wasn't the smell that did it. It was Leroy talking about himself and telling bits and pieces of his story that got to Martha. Here was a man who had been a child, a husband, a father. He had worked and loved and lost. He had suffered failure and misfortune. He was now on the street, barely living. And yet there was warmth, laughter, humanity and personality to him. He was a child of God no less than Martha or anyone else. This may have been obvious to other volunteers, but for some reason Martha couldn't understand, she was being drawn in by Leroy. She felt it in her gut – a mix of pain and sorrow and... was it love?

Now 20 years later, Martha still remembered that first encounter with Leroy. Eventually, though, Leroy, like many on the streets, contracted an infection, the result of numerous untreated conditions from exposure and poor nutrition. They got a call one day at the church: could someone come to identify a body. Evidently, Leroy had a card with the church address and phone number in his pocket. Martha's name was also written on it. Martha remembered seeing Leroy's corpse. Poor man. She only let out a tear or two at the morgue. It was later at home she had a real cry. Her heart was torn in two. What was it about Leroy? What was it deep inside that caught her when she thought about him?

2) Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the architect of the Truth and Reconciliation committee in South Africa, tells the story of what happened to him on the first day of hearings. People were coming forward to tell their stories - terrible stories of atrocities and the suffering they experienced. It was at the end of a long and grueling first day. A man came forward to tell the story of what happened to

him - how he was tortured. At a certain point in his recounting, he stopped talking. He couldn't go on. When he tried to start again, he began to stutter. He tried once more. He just couldn't continue. And then, he just broke down weeping. It was then that Tutu lost it. He started weeping with the man.

3) I remember something that happened to me not so long ago, something that's happened to me several times as a minister. It had been a particularly busy week. My head was all over the place and I was going from one thing to the next. I needed to fit in a visit. I went to the hospital. I knew the woman I was visiting. I had been her minister for years. I found her in the hospital corridor waiting for some tests. This woman had been through a lot over the years, and it wasn't clear what she was up against now. I was already feeling burdened. Could I handle more depressing news? But she just started telling me her story again. Somehow, I was able to listen. The listening was cathartic. I felt the burdens I was carrying just lift. She was so thankful I had come. We prayed together. I left with a certain lightness of being. I felt alive and grounded again in my vocation. I was spiritually refreshed and renewed. What was it that happened?

4) Before we zero in on some analysis, let me tell one final story. It's a story the Dalai Lama tells about a fellow Buddhist monk who was imprisoned by the Chinese for 18 years. The monk, along with other prisoners, was tortured, brutalized and left exposed to the elements. He survived to tell his story. How did he survive? He told the Dalai Lama that the greatest dangers he faced were not physical, but spiritual. The greatest dangers had to do with losing his compassion for the guards. Can you believe that? The greatest risk for him was not surviving physically or mentally but losing his heart and his humanity. That's what got him through his imprisonment, finding a way to hold on to his compassion rather than allow hate to sprout seeds within and destroy him. Wow...

5) And this leads us straight to our gospel lesson this morning. Even though the four stories I've recounted are all very different, there is something about them that comes from a common core. Whether it's Martha having to confront her disgust at another person, Tutu facing the weight of the suffering of another person, my personal distractions and burdens that made it extra difficult to be present with another person in need, or the Buddhist monk's danger of being swallowed up by hate... beyond all that, there is something else that happened within us to transform us like nothing else could. What was it exactly?

Let us search our gospel lesson for some revelatory insight. Jesus tells a story, one of his best-known ones. It's called 'The Good Samaritan.' Why does he tell it? He tells it in response to a question. The question is asked by a powerful official. He wants to discredit Jesus publicly and bring him down. In that world, a powerful official is not only a political official, but a religious official too. The problem is: his religion and the religion Jesus wants to inspire are very different. He asks Jesus: 'Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Eternal life is not life after death. It's about life's greatest purpose and joy. He's asking Jesus what he and everyone else must do to discover life's greatest purpose and joy. That's what everyone in the crowd wants to discover more than ever. They're desperate. Is it Jesus or the religious official who've got the answer?

Well, how does Jesus' answer? Jesus answers by getting the official to answer his own question: To inherit eternal life our sacred law teaches that we must: 'love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength, and with all our mind; and our neighbour as ourselves.' The verb is critical here. What we must do is 'love.'

Jesus is telling him that if he really loves, then he will find life's greatest purpose and joy. But the official doesn't want Jesus to get the upper hand in this public exchange. He asks him a counter question that is politically and socially controversial: 'And who is my neighbour that I should love them?' It's one thing to say I love my neighbour, but depending on who my neighbour is, people may have all kinds of ideas about love. Whichever way Jesus answers, he risks losing much of his popular support. And that's the goal: to make Jesus look bad.

Well, Jesus is not afraid of controversy. In fact, he uses the occasion to tell a story, a story with a twist, several twists, in fact.

The story is simple, but the demands it makes of its listeners are anything but simple. It's about a man travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho – a notoriously dangerous route. Why take that route if it's dangerous? It's the faster route. Unfortunately, he runs into some shady characters. They rob him and beat him, leaving him for dead. What happens next? One and then another person are traveling on the same road. They see this man. Is he dead or alive? They can't tell. To find out would be risky. Someone may be waiting behind the bushes. But also, any contact with a man probably dead is religious contamination according to the sacred law. Once contaminated you'd have to go through other rituals to become pure again. Coming from Jerusalem, they're probably coming from the temple where they've already been through all kinds of rituals. To have to undergo cleansing rituals again would be highly inconvenient and expensive, besides the risk of robbery and attack.

But here's the catch – both the priest and the Levite are religious officials, just like the one asking Jesus the question. If they have just come from the temple and really absorbed the requirements of the law when it comes to love, are they fulfilling or failing to fulfill the law when it comes to loving their neighbour?

But here's another twist, an even bigger one. There's a third person who comes by on the same road. We're told he's a Samaritan. A Samaritan is to a Jew what the vilest person we can think of would be for each of us. Think about the kind of person you would really find it hard to love... that's a Samaritan! And yet, what does this Samaritan do? He not only checks on the man at great risk to himself. He also takes on the inconvenience and expense of transporting the man who is still alive to the closest place he can be cared for. The Samaritan takes care of him himself, and he arranges care for him longer term, however long care is needed for full recovery. The injured man may never know who cared for him. The injured man is probably a Jew and even though his own fellow Jews, and Jews who are supposed to be religious, have abandoned him for dead, his enemy Samaritan has taken care of him. Isn't that crazy?

Now if these are not enough twists for us already, there is one more, the most important twist of all. Jesus is not satisfied with talking about loving actions. People do things for all kinds of reasons. Rather, Jesus wants to zero in on something much more profound that happens in the person acting. Unless our actions come from a place in our heart and soul that transforms us inside out, we cannot find the kind of purpose and joy loving God and neighbour can give us... So, what's this place in our heart and soul Jesus is pointing to?

We're told: When the Samaritan saw the man lying on the road, "he was moved with pity." The translation is inadequate. There is one key word used here, a word that's used throughout the gospels to describe what happens in Jesus when he engages people in need. The word is: '*esplaxnisthe*.' Your '*splaxna*' are your viscera. Upon seeing a man half-dead, in agony and pain, the Samaritan had a visceral reaction, like being hit in the stomach, finding it hard to breathe. That's how affected he was by what he saw. That's how poignantly he feels the man's pain and suffering. It doesn't matter if the man is his enemy. It doesn't matter the inconvenience of stopping, of dealing with serious injury, of spending money. There is a human being in pain and need. He cannot pass by on the other side.

The best word in English for such a powerful inner response to the suffering of another person is: compassion. Compassion is co-passion, a passion for another especially the suffering of another. To have the capacity to feel for another that way, to develop that kind of inner capacity for compassion... this, declares Jesus, is the kind of love that will not only save the world, but it will save you too. Compassion and the cultivation of compassion is the single most important goal of life. The development of compassion is the single greatest pathway to life's deepest purpose and joy. Do you believe this? Have you experienced this?

Let us pray: We want to find the secret to joy, O God... we want to find our purpose with greater clarity... Inspire us to find our purpose and joy with compassion as a key ingredient on our journey... In Jesus' name... Amen.