

The Healing of Compassion

Mark 1: 40-42; Luke 15:11-24

I don't know anything more healing than compassion, sheer unbidden compassion. It may have come to you in a phone call, a long hug, a hand on a shoulder or a deep listening and understanding, but as you experience it, it feels like healing has begun.

Our sign outside our entry door has as its last line, Be Kind. It might well have been the first line.

The Dalai Lama, world-wide leader of Tibetan Buddhism, was asked about his religion. He replied, "My religion is very simple. My religion is kindness." Could our religion be that simple? The biblical word for kindness is compassion. We learn what it is by watching Jesus in action. He was the divine compassion made flesh.

I

Let's play with some words as we seek compassion's meaning for us. The English word means to *feel alongside*, feel *with* another. The Greek word has to do with our inmost organs. When we have compassion, we are stirred at our depths. The Hebrew word for compassion comes from the Hebrew word for "womb." God's love, God's compassion is womb-like.

If you look the word up in dictionaries it generally combines a deep feeling *for* and understanding *of* another's misery and suffering along with a desire to help alleviate that suffering.

And if we cannot alleviate it, we can sit with them, be with them in the storm so they are not alone in their suffering.

During our Season of Grace we have read a couple of verses in our Call to Gathering. The text is about Jesus passing through villages preaching the kingdom and healing people. And it ends with the words:

When he saw the crowds he *had compassion* on them, because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

There are many ways to suffer being harassed. If you are upper-crust enough, you pronounce it "harassed". Someone has described an intellectual as one who hears the William Tell Overture and does *not* think of the Lone Ranger. Intellectuals pronounce it "harassed."

One dictionary defines it as being on the receiving end of aggressive pressure or intimidation. This can happen on all kinds of levels, personal, social, political. People and institutions can act on us in the most painful ways. It is a form of suffering, and Jesus cared about it.

As he cared for the *helpless*. These who don't know what to do or where to turn. We can feel we are at the end of our rope. Jesus shows us that God is at the end of the rope.

A leper came to Jesus and pleaded, "If you *want*, you can make me clean." And Jesus, the text says, was "moved with compassion". "I *do want*", he said, and touched this untouchable man and healed him. Jesus shows that God always wants our healing and wholeness. We can be touched by someone's compassion for us, and healing has begun.

II

Jesus' two most famous parables were about compassion. You know them like the back of your hand.

A man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho fell among thieves who beat him and robbed him and left him half-dead. Two professional religious types came by and each ignored the man and passed by presumably on the way to the temple in Jerusalem to do something "holy". I think that was Jesus' point. What really is holy?

But a man who was despised because he was an "outsider", an "unclean" Samaritan, came by and "*had compassion*" on him, bound his wounds, carried him to an inn on his donkey, nursed him through the night and the next morning

left his credit card information with the inn keeper and said, take care of his needs and charge it to me. Compassion.

In the other story the younger of two sons came to his father and asked for his share of the inheritance *now!* His father gave it to him. The townspeople were scandalized by the son's utter disrespect for his father.

The younger son went into "the far country" and squandered his inheritance in "loose living", the text says. You can fill in the details, plenty of others have, including the elder brother.

One day, the young man "came to himself" and, preparing in his mind a speech of repentance, started home. When his father saw him coming up the road, he "*had compassion*" on him, and running, running came to him, put his arms around him and kissed him. And before the son could sputter out his speech of repentance the father called for a homecoming feast, fatted calf and all.

Jesus said, this is what God is like.

At the end of Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says— instead of, as in Matthew's version, "Be perfect as your Abba in heaven is perfect"—"Be merciful as your Abba in heaven is merciful." Maybe God's perfection, has a lot to do with compassion.

What do these stories stir in you? Who are you in these stories? Who have you been in them?

III

Now let's talk about being a *community of compassion*. Perhaps this is the most essential dimension to our being a community of Jesus.

I'm going to tell two more stories about compassion, these from the fourth century desert fathers and mothers (*Abbas* and *Immas*) who fled the cities into the desert to save their souls. Life in the city was killing their souls. Our own culture in America can do that to us, with its enmity and anger and cruelty and non-stop busyness.

What happened in the wilderness was that they learned compassion, God's compassion. When you are alone with yourself long enough and you don't have *others* to deal with, you have *yourself* to deal with. There we discover our utter need of God's mercy and compassion.

And when they returned to the cities, they had the deepest compassion for everyone. They wrote, in their words, about "dying to self", which means dying to the false self with all its compulsions and illusions and ego-isms, so that we might connect more deeply with the true self, which is created in the image of God.

And they wrote of “dying to neighbor”, a most curious phrase. When we die to neighbor, we give up measuring others as a way of bolstering the self. We give up measuring at all. Desert father Abba Moses wrote about this in his sermon on Jesus’ words, “Judge Not”:

To die to one’s neighbor is this: to bear your own faults and do not pay any attention to anyone else, wondering whether they are good or bad. Do no harm to anyone, do not scorn the man who does evil.... Do not have hostile feelings toward anyone and do not let dislike dominate your heart.

Well! At this point we might say with Jesus’ disciples, “Lord, this is impossible!” And Jesus would say to us as he did to them, “Yes, with you, but not for God and God working in you.”

Real change here may require some desert time alone for us all. The desert fathers and mothers were, as Jesus, fond of stories. They told these two. Some of you have heard these before, but I needed to hear them again. The past five or so years in America have been a severe test for trying to live with compassion.

Here’s the first story:

A brother committed a fault and was called before the council. They invited Abba Moses to join the council. He got up and went. He filled up a leaky jug with water and made his way to them.

When the council saw him coming, they went to meet him, and as they saw the leaking jug asked, “What is this?” Abba Moses replied, “My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another?” When the council heard these words, they forgave their brother and said no more to him about his faults.

The second story. Three old men, one of whom had a bad reputation, came to Abba Achilles. The first asked him to make for him a fishing net. Abba Achilles said he had no time, no.

The second man came to Abba Achilles and said, “Make me a fishing net so I can have a souvenir of you in the monastery.” But Abba Achilles said, “I do not have the time.”

Then the third man, the one with the bad reputation, came to him and said, “Please make me a fishing net, so I may have something from your hands, Abba.” And Abba Achilles answered at once: “For you I will make one.”

The first two men, watching all this, asked to meet with Abba Achilles privately. “Why did you not do what *we* asked, but you promised to do what *he* asked?” Abba Achilles answered:

I told you I would not make one for you, and you were not dejected because you thought I had no time. But if I had refused to make one for him, he

would have said, “The Abba has heard of my sins and that is why he does not want to make me anything”, and so our relationship would have broken down. But now I have cheered his soul, so that he will not be overcome with grief.

IV

These stories work on me from the inside out because they help me imagine how I might show compassion. And because they remind me of when I have been given compassion.

How might we here become more of a community of compassion? In our personal lives and as we as a community show compassion? It may be our most important calling.

If someone asked you, us, what our religion is, might we say, “Our religion is very simple. Our religion is compassion.” It might be that simple—and that challenging.