

A Community of Compassion

Matthew 9: 35-38

The Dalai Lama, world-wide leader of Tibetan Buddhism, when asked about his religion, replied, “My religion is very simple. My religion is kindness”.

We could or should say the same thing about the religion of Jesus: it is a religion of kindness.

The Biblical word for kindness is compassion. The religion of Jesus was a religion of compassion. He was the Divine Compassion made flesh.

Today in our series of sermons on The Renewal of Community I want to speak about the church as a community of compassion. In as much as the church has the heart of Jesus it is.

I

The Greek work for compassion has to do with our innermost organs. When you have compassion you are stirred from your depths. The Hebrew word for compassion comes from the Hebrew word for womb. The divine compassion is womb-like, as the love of a mother for her child.

If you look the word up in Webster’s dictionary it defines compassion:

The deep feeling for and understanding of misery or suffering and the concomitant desire to promote its alleviation.

I like that; it combines a feeling, for and with, understanding and action on behalf of those who suffer.

All that's a good start but if you want to see what compassion is watch Jesus. The divine compassion made flesh. In the gospels it always refers to the compassion of God or Jesus.

II

Over and over again in the gospels Jesus is described as compassion in action—as in today's text:

And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity. When he saw the crowds, he had *compassion* for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

(Matthew 9:35-36 RSV)

To those sick of body and mind, Jesus' compassion issued into healing: "As he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had *compassion* on them and healed their sick." (Matthew 14:14)

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, Jesus said, and he touched this untouchable man and healed him. (Mark 1:40-42)

Once Jesus saw the body of a young man being carried out of a house, the only son of a widow. How terrible to lose both your husband and your only son! When Jesus saw the widow, he “had *compassion* on her” and brought the son back to life. (Luke 7:13)

There’s more. Jesus had compassion for a large crowd who had gathered to hear him preach who now were hungry. “I have *compassion* on the crowd”, he said, “And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.” (Matthew 15:32) So he took some loaves and fishes, multiplied them and fed them. God’s compassion wants the hungry fed.

Jesus’ compassion also reached out to those buffeted by life, to those who had lost their way, “harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.”

Come to me, he said, you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matt. 11:28)

His compassion went out to people whatever their sickness, need, weakness or lostness.

I said above that the word compassion was used only in reference to God and Jesus. That's not quite right. Jesus used the word to describe the actions of characters in two of his most famous parables:

In the first parable (Luke 10:29-32) a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves who robbed him, beat him and left him half-dead. Two Jewish religious leaders came by, and each of them ignored the man and his need, and seeing him and passed by on the other side.

Then a despised Samaritan came by, saw the man and “had *compassion* on him.” He bandaged the man's wounds, put him on his donkey and walked him to an inn where he nursed the man through the night. The next morning he paid for the night's stay and left his credit card to pay whatever the man's further expenses might be.

In the second parable (Luke 15:11-32), the younger of two brothers asked for his inheritance and left home. It was a horrendously disrespectful and humiliating thing to do to his father. The young man went into the “far country”, where he squandered his inheritance in “loose living”. (You fill in the details!) Then one day in desperate straits, he “came to himself” and returned home to beg his father to take him in, not as a son, but as a hired hand. The father saw him at a distance and “had *compassion*” on him and ran to him and embraced him and

kissed and kissed him and called for a homecoming feast befitting an honored son. God's compassion is like that.

In his sermon on the plains in Luke, Jesus turned to his disciples and said, "Be compassionate as your *Abba* in heaven is compassionate" (Luke 6:26). These are his words to us as well. How can we become more truly a community of compassion?

IV

Such compassion requires deep inner spiritual work. The desert fathers and mothers in the 4th century fled the cities and went to the desert to save their souls. The life of the city and its culture was killing them spiritually. Our culture can do this to us today. What they learned in the desert was compassion, and when they returned they gave such compassion to others.

What they learned in the desert was what it meant to "die to self" and to "die to neighbor".

How is it they learned compassion in the desert, not in the cities? When we're with people all the time in the frenzied pace of life, it is easy to get into the habit of judging others. But when we are alone with God, we see more clearly our own darkness and weakness. We discover our absolute need for the mercy of God. This is the dying of the false self with its illusions and compulsions and the

birth of the true self. From this furnace of transformation, we return to the world a more compassionate person.

The desert mothers and fathers said compassion is also a *dying to our neighbor*. We stop measuring others as a way of bolstering the self. We stop evaluating and judging others at all.

Abba Moses, one of the followers of the first desert father Abba Anthony, commenting on Jesus' command "Judge not", said,

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

That's a tall order! But Jesus can help us.

I will close with two stories from the desert fathers and mothers which illustrate compassion.

A brother committed a fault and was called before the council. They invited Abba Moses to join in the council. Abba Moses got up and went. He took a leaking jug, filled it with water and carried it to them. When the council saw him coming, they went out to meet him. "What is this?" they asked, as they saw the

leaking jug. Abba Moses said, “My sins run our behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the error of another?” When the council heard this, they forgave the brother and said no more to him.

The second story: Three old men, one of whom had a bad reputation, came one day to Abba Achilles. The first asked him to make him a fishing net. “I will not make one”, Abba Achilles replied. The second old man came and said, “Father, make me a fishing net so I can have a souvenir of you in the monastery”. But he said to him, “I do not have time”. Then the third one with the bad reputation came and said, “Make me a fishing net so that I may have something from your hands, Father.” Abba Achilles answered at once, “For you I will make one.”

The other two men asked him privately, “Why did you not do what we asked, but you promised him to do what he asked?” Abba Achilles gave this answer:

I told you I would not make one and you were not disappointed since you thought that I had no time. But if I had refused to make one for him, he would have said, “The old man has heard about my sin; 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.

V

Can we be such a people of compassion? It begins in silence and time alone with yourself and God. And it may begin here: With your learning to show compassion to *yourself*. Showing tenderness and kindness to you own dear self. Pema Chodron, a Buddhist nun and extraordinary spiritual teacher calls self-compassion *maitre*. She says it is making friends with yourself, making friends with your own mind and body. This she says is the basis of compassion.

Jesus commanded us to love our neighbor as ourselves. He might well have said, be compassionate to others as you are to yourself. The road to compassion begins with self-compassion.

Take you own life into your arms and a child and love it as God has loved you from the first and will love you forever.