

WB Friends Meeting  
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### **“What, exactly, is compassion?”**

I've recently been reading a book by Felten and Procter-Murphy titled, Living the Questions, and I was drawn to a chapter simply called “Compassion.” It seems like we are living in a time when we all need an extra dose of compassion when there is so much suffering in the world right now. These authors suggest that Jesus' ministry can be summed up in this one word, 'compassion'. So maybe we should spend a little time understanding why they might make this analysis.

In all honesty, I will have to admit I often feel like I fall way short when it comes to being a person of compassion. There are probably several reasons for this assessment: looking back on my life, I realize my ego probably played a fairly large role in my experiences – always looking out for my own best interests - and also the fact that I lived a very 'easy' life growing up. My family was never hungry, never homeless, never without work. We were church regulars (usually whenever the doors were open) and life was pretty smooth, even though as a teenager, I thought my parents were way too strict! When my college education was finished, like most young women in the 60's and 70's my goal was to find some cute guy to date, then marry, and then have a family. Mostly all things that didn't require much compassion on my part!

But if Jesus' main teaching was encompassed with compassion, I decided it's probably important to really understand what that might have involved - for both *his* ministry, and our lives today. So once again, let me take you back to Jesus' ministry and what life was like for a Jew – especially a Jewish teacher like Jesus. In 63 BC, Rome annexed Palestine, and the Roman presence affected almost every aspect of life for the Jews, making it difficult to maintain their Jewish faith. The way many faithful Jews decided to keep their faith strong was to follow the ancient Torah's holiness code and God's mandate found in Leviticus 19:2:

***“...be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.”***

Unfortunately, this idea of holiness carried with it the need for perfection, which eventually led to Jews judging each other as either clean or unclean, pure or defiled, and righteous or sinner. Sound like anything we may be dealing with today? I think so! – there are many sides being taken on a variety of issues today: in many ways the same as it was with Jesus' Jewish faithful! This is what Jesus was confronted with daily from the leaders of his faith.

They were critical of his work – healing on the Sabbath, eating with sinners, touching the lepers; all events breaking the holiness codes. In each instance, Jesus modeled for us the way we are called to live: treating our fellow human beings with kindness, respect, and mercy – no matter the circumstances. Jesus lived out the understanding that actions of love are more important than expressing our beliefs, or keeping rigid laws for proper behavior.

There was the time a man with a withered hand approached Jesus and asked for healing. Just imagine living in a time when everything you did to support your family required the use of your hands. Only one problem – this request for healing came on a Sunday. Jewish law said you didn't work on the Sabbath, so, of course, the Jewish leaders decided Jesus wasn't really a part of them since breaking the holiness code meant he wasn't pure. But he reminded them in Matthew 12: 6-8:

***“Is there's a person here who, finding one of your lambs fallen into a ravine, wouldn't, even though it was a Sabbath, pull it out? Surely kindness to people is as legal as kindness to animals!” Then he said to the man, “Hold out your hand.” He held it out and it was healed. The Pharisees walked out furious, sputtering about how they were going to ruin Jesus.”***

And I have to admit, there are many of our leaders as well as perhaps even some of our friends and neighbors today who don't want to hear anyone talk about compassion. It makes me wonder why are we so afraid of showing compassion? Compassion for those dying of the virus and buried in mass graves. Compassion for the ways African Americans have been racially profiled – arrested in overtly aggressive ways, and for decades been treated differently than a white person would have been treated. These all seem to me to be calling for our compassion.

Jesus demonstrated a way of life that transformed a person by being compassionate. For us to be compassionate today, it requires us to recognize

we are ALL interdependent in God's world, and to see all people as brothers and sisters. I'm afraid we have a long way to go to get to that place. When Jesus looked into someone's eyes, it seems like he was also looking into their hearts: seeing who they were and what they needed. The fact that Jesus was drawn to sick people, and sick people were drawn to him tells us something, teaches us how we should also view others we come in contact with.

Our English word 'compassion' comes from the Latin and means 'to bear or feel the suffering of another' – not just intellectually, but deep within our souls. The writer of the Old Testament book of Ezekiel pleaded for his people to move toward compassion in chapter 18, verse 31:

***“Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit”***

Shouldn't this be a call for us today as well as for the ancient Jews? Is it possible that every time we interact with another human, we will either build the person up, or tear the person down? We will create, or we will destroy one of God's creations? When I read that statement, it really caused me to pause and think about it. What do I do when I interact with anyone – whether it's a good friend or the person who cuts in front of me so closely on I-80 that it's a miracle there wasn't an accident? What are my thoughts about that person?

This example of our choices of how we view others is highlighted by an experience Steven Covey had while riding on a subway in New York City. The people were mostly sitting quietly that morning – reading the paper, sipping their first cup of coffee to help wake them up, or maybe catching a few more winks of sleep before starting their long day.

At the next station a man and his children entered the subway car and the children were so loud and rambunctious that it completely changed the whole climate for the travelers. The man sat next to Covey and closed his eyes while meanwhile the children were yelling back and forth, throwing things, and even grabbing people's newspapers. It was all really disturbing, and yet the man next to Covey did nothing to try and control the wild kids.

Finally, with as much patience and restraint as he could manage, Covey turned to the man and told him his children were really bothering the other riders and asked him to please control them a little more. The man raised his head

and looked at the situation like he hadn't been aware what was happening and softly admitted that Covey was right and he should do something about it. Then he said they had just come from the hospital where the kids' mother had died about an hour before.

The man hadn't known what to think, and he guessed his children didn't know how to handle it, either. Covey says he was stunned and suddenly saw things differently, felt differently, and responded differently because his heart was filled with the man's pain and the feelings of sympathy and compassion flowed freely as he encouraged the man to talk about his wife, and asked him if there was anything he could do to help.

The way of Jesus – his teaching, his modeling of compassion is creative, it's healing, and life-giving. To be compassionate is to become fully aware of our utter interdependence with each other in God's world. So here are the questions I need to ask myself:

- Can I say I am a follower of Jesus' teachings if I don't see others the way Jesus might see them – with compassion?
- **Every day when I hear of hundreds more who have died with the virus, is my heart breaking for the mother, the father, the children of that person?**
- When I am forced to consider someone I'm not fond of, how many times have I looked for the light of God within that person – the same light I profess to have within me?
- **How am I modeling compassion for my children and my grandchildren?**
- What actions will I take to be a person of compassion?

It's not easy! I still don't think I'm the compassionate person I'd like to be. But the first step is becoming aware of our levels of compassion. One thing I've come to realize about compassion is simply that it requires us to do more than just some act of kindness for someone; it's doing these things that make a difference because we feel compassion for another deep in our hearts that moves us to do something to help someone in need – not just because it's the right thing to do, but because of the way our compassion compels us to feel another's pain.

I have seen compassion from many of you who are gathered here this morning. Offering to help someone move, working to prepare the house next door to the meetinghouse to rent, taking food to the sick, offering funding for immigrants who have been arrested and need an attorney to help, inviting the lonely for a meal, sending a note of encouragement to someone struggling, going to work in NY City to help those with the virus. This list could go on and on.

This time of the racial division in our country is the time for us to show compassion, to try and imagine what the lives of those of us who are white might be like if we had been unfairly treated by those of another race. The level of compassion and care for people of color has risen because justice has not been served. We may be joining the marches for justice, or we may simply feel called to pray for a peaceful resolution to change the harm that has been done.

But the challenge for me is simply to feel the pain, deep within, and ***then*** do what I can to be a part of the solution.

And remember: ***God is love, all the time....and all the time, God is love!***