

West Branch Friends Meeting  
July 28, 2019  
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“The Luck of the Draw and Being Compassionate”

The past couple of weeks have been fraught with deeply challenging comments on social media, especially, not the least of which has been the idea that if you don't love this country, you should leave. It's been stated by our leader, it's been stated by church leaders (a sign outside one Baptist church with the name “Friendship Church”) said it very plainly – “America – Love it or Leave it,” and by various social media contributors. And there's also been the idea that if you are an immigrant who is now a legal US citizen, and dare to offer suggestions as to how this country could be made even better, you might be told to go back to the country of your ancestors.

I don't really understand that idea, because unless our ancestors were Native Americans, we would have to ALL move to the countries of our immigrating ancestors. I'd be going to England, or Germany (and I really have no desire to do live in either)! Here are things I think about when hearing how people from other countries don't belong here.

What if I had been born in Syria, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia or any other war torn middle eastern country, and my city had been bombed, several family members killed, and my parents found a way to get out and get us to America, called the land of the free? How would I feel here now? Or what if I had been born in Mexico or any Central American country and watched gangs threaten my children, and lack of food and jobs make my life painful each and every day? Or any country, really, where freedoms are limited, and my family and I yearned for a chance for a better life? Because quite frankly, I DIDN'T GET TO CHOOSE WHERE I WAS BORN- and neither did anyone living on this planet!

This has caused me to dwell on the whole concept of compassion this week, because Jesus, who is our example, was compassionate in every encounter he had with the sick, the marginalized, the stranger, and anyone considered 'less than' in his country. Here are just a few verses that remind us of Jesus' compassion.

In Luke 7:13 we read this example of compassion when Jesus saw a woman weeping over her deathly ill son and took action to save him:

***“When the Lord saw her, He felt compassion for her, and said to her, “Do not weep.”***

In Matthew 20:32-34, two blind men begged Jesus to give them back their sight.

***“Jesus stopped and called them. “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked. “Lord,” they answered, “we want our sight.” Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him.”***

In Mark 1:41, a man with leprosy fell on his knees, begging for healing.

***“Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, “I am willing; be cleansed.”***

And yet another example from Mark 8: 2, these words from Jesus after prolonged teaching to crowds:

***“I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat.”*** And then they the picnic!

So two questions come to mind: first, why should **we** feel compassion for others, and then, **how** do we go about acting in compassionate ways?

I think the answer to why we should feel compassion for others is quickly answered in James 2: 14-18 (from The Message)

***“Dear friends, do you think you’ll get anywhere in this life if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, “Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!” and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup—***

***where does that get you? Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?***

***I can already hear one of you agreeing by saying, "Sounds good. You take care of the faith department, I'll handle the works department."***

***Not so fast. You can no more show me your works apart from your faith than I can show you my faith apart from my works. Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove."***

Pretty clear cut – without doing something out of compassion, we really don't have faith (or Christianity). So how can we develop compassion that leads to action? We can begin by prayerfully opening our eyes to the needs around us. A good place to start may be to consider just a few of the Twelve Grand Challenges of Social Work:

- Ensure healthy development for all youth
- Close the health gap
- Stop family violence
- Eradicate social isolation
- End homelessness
- Reduce extreme economic inequality
- Build financial capability for all
- Achieve equal opportunity and justice

If that list is too mind boggling (which it kind of is), how about just focusing on one or two ways we can champion social justice: volunteer at a local shelter or give financially to groups like the CommUnity Center, food pantries, homeless shelters; be informed about legislation that will be harmful to families living from day to day without adequate resources; or just offer to help when any need arises. These actions – these works – will be just as effective – or more – as any message from a pastor on a Sunday morning.

And here's the bonus: one of the reasons Jesus' teachings were so powerful was from the reciprocal effect the act of helping others has on us! Not only is it deeply gratifying, it also brings us together and binds us in community and love. People who volunteer have been known to live longer lives, feel better about themselves, and have a more positive outlook on life in general. Choosing to care for others over ourselves has

been shown to decrease stress through lowered blood pressure and less inflammation.

I'm not talking about big actions where you quit your job or do something radical like go live in a homeless shelter! Just a simple act like opening the door for someone in a wheelchair, taking food to a sick neighbor, or calling an elderly person who might be lonely. We can use our imaginations to think of all the ways we can consider others as more important than ourselves.

Compassion like Jesus showed....pick any of the gospels and read some of the ways Jesus felt compassion, and then did something about it. I was born in Des Moines, Iowa, to parents who were able to provide well for me. But I didn't get to choose that, any more than an immigrant coming to the US got to choose his or her beginnings. When I see immigrants being held in horrific conditions, families separated, no health care, no chance to have the opportunities I have had, my compassion is there! Now I have to figure out how to make my works address what I see as injustice.

Just this past week there was a group of neighbors who joined hands and surrounded a van where a father and his young son had locked themselves in to avoid being arrested by ICE – immigration police, if you will. The neighbors, who had known, lived by, and worked with this family for many years, felt it was an injustice to arrest a man who just wanted a better life for his family, and so they had compassion and surrounded the van to protect their neighbor and friend. I presume this man and his family came here for a better life, and yes, there might be justification according to the law, to take this man away from his family. But that's not what I was thinking about. I had to ask myself if it had been MY neighbor, and I thought it was an injustice and I had compassion for my neighbor, would I have been willing to join hands with others in protest of his arrest? Because that's what compassion requires: actions. And it takes courage to do what we should do, and face whatever consequences might follow.

I liked a tweet that former first lady Michelle Obama wrote in response to the idea that immigrants should be sent back to their countries of

origin. She said: "It's not my country, it's not your country, it's OUR country."

America – the land of the free. Or is it?