

Compassion Is Something We Do

Mark 1:40-45

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A man was making a telephone call, and even before he finished dialing knew he had made a mistake. The phone rang a couple of times, then someone picked it up and a husky voice on the other end said, "You've got the wrong number," then he hung up.

Curious about this, the man dialed the number again.

"I said you've got the wrong number," said the voice at the other end.

The man thought to himself, "How could he possibly know that it was the wrong number?" The man worked for the NYPD; as a cop, he was trained to be curious... and concerned. So he dialed the number again.

"Is this you again?"

"Yea," said the police officer, "and I'm wondering how you could possibly know I had the wrong number even before I said anything."

"You figure it out," said the voice on the other end, and before the officer could get in another word, the man at the other end slammed the phone down again.

After a few minutes, the police officer called the number again.

"Did you figure it out?" said the husky voice.

The police officer answered, "The only thing I can figure out is that no one ever calls you."

"You got it," said the voice, and the phone went dead for the fourth time.

That man must've lived a lonely, isolated existence for him to assume that any phone call to his home would be a wrong number. It would have to be a lifetime of rejection and failure and being on the outside looking in, that would make the man assume that nobody would actually want to talk to him.

Mark tells us that as Jesus and his disciples were traveling through the countryside of Galilee, a man with leprosy came up to Jesus. Leprosy has always had a stigma associated with it. It is contagious, and left untreated it disfigures its victim in a slow progression. Lepers have been isolated and sent off to colonies of their own in order to prevent the disease from spreading.

In the biblical stories, the word for leprosy isn't necessarily the same as what we today know as Hansen's disease. The word for leprosy in biblical literature can refer to any contagious skin condition. And according to the Old Testament purity laws that dictated who would be part of the community and who could not participate in the life of the community, anyone with a leprous skin condition was expelled from the community. They were required to wear clothing that would identify them as lepers. They were required to stay away from the towns and villages. They were required to announce their presence by crying out, "Unclean! Unclean!" so that people could make sure they would avoid any contact with the lepers.

And so the man with leprosy came to Jesus, and Mark tells us that the leper begged Jesus on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." It was a sense of desperation that drove the man to Jesus. Notice

what it was that the man asked for. He didn't ask to be cured; he asked to be made clean. Some people wouldn't think there was a difference between the two, but I think there is. It's not that the man didn't want his leprosy to be taken away--of course he wanted his physical health restored. But even more, he wanted to be declared clean, to be declared worthy of acceptance back into the community of faith.

Thomas Troeger notes that "The accumulated burden of rejections, taunts, and hostility probably weighed the leper down as he knelt before Jesus. It was not just his skin that was scarred. It was his soul that needed healing as much as his body. He hungered for the restoration of hearing and knowing, Yes! I am a human being. Yes! I am precious in the eyes of God. Yes! I, too, am worthy of belonging to the community of the people of God. Yes! I am a person capable of giving and receiving love..."¹

Don't you see--as much as this man wanted his skin cured of his disease, even more he wanted to be accepted by God and by God's people.

And as Mark describes the reaction of Jesus, the NIV translation says that Jesus was filled with compassion. Other translations say "moved with pity." And yet the sense of the word that is translated as "compassion" or "pity" has a much more active, visceral meaning. The Greek word carries the connotation of boiling over with emotion, even of anger. When the NIV says that Jesus had compassion for the leper, it is not saying that Jesus was angry at the leper; rather, the sense is that Jesus was angry at the situation that has isolated the leper and cast him outside the community of faith. Jesus was angry that the religious leaders used the purity laws as a way, not only of expelling lepers from the community, but also banishing them from the hope of salvation.

In his compassion, Jesus was moved to act on behalf of the leper. So Jesus said to the leper, "I am willing. Be clean!" And then Jesus reached out and touched the leper with his hand. And Mark tells us that the leprosy left the man, and he was cured.

But perhaps even more telling than the cure of the physical skin condition was the way that Jesus broke the social taboos and touched an untouchable man and, even more, declared him to be clean, acceptable. Jesus gave the man what he truly wanted and needed--he gave the man the assurance that God loved him and that he mattered and that he was welcome as a friend of Jesus. Even if the leprosy had not been cured, the man had experienced healing, for Jesus had embraced him.

You see, compassion is more than a feeling that we have for someone's circumstances. Compassion after the way of Jesus is something we act upon. Compassion after the example of Christ means that we are moved by someone's situation, and we seek to correct it. Compassion after the way of Christ means acting upon the unrest that arises within us. Compassion is not truly compassion unless it is something we do.

In a discussion of the relationship between faith and works, James the brother of Jesus said this: "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says..., 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?"² In a very real way, compassion without action is not truly compassion. Feeling sorry for someone is not the same as being compassionate. One can feel sorry for someone without being compassionate. Compassion is something you do; it is acting to do something about the situation that makes you feel sorry for someone.

Judy Warren is a Presbyterian in West Texas whose brother contracted AIDS. She was ashamed to let others know about her brother's illness. Even in the late stages of AIDS, when the brother came to live with Judy, she didn't let a lot of people know about it. Yet a few people from the church came to Judy's side and to her brother's side, and they surrounded Judy and her brother with love and support.

And later on, after her brother died, Judy began to reach out to others who had AIDS, and she began a support group ministry. She asked for and received permission to have support group meetings in her church. When she first started the meetings, the custodians at the church refused to go into the rooms where the people with AIDS had been meeting, and they refused to clean up after the support groups. There was a palpable tension within the church about letting “those people” into the same building where good upstanding Christians would gather every Sunday.

But over the years the hard hearts began to soften, and the church members embraced the modern-day lepers. No longer were custodians afraid to clean the meeting rooms. No longer were people worried about AIDS patients using the same restrooms. The church even provided office space for the ministry. The church became a place of welcome.

You see, they learned that compassion was more than simply feeling sorry for certain people. Compassion also meant welcoming them into the community of faith and sharing the love of Jesus with them.

Compassion is something we do. Compassion happens when we open our hearts to those on the periphery, those on the outside looking in, those whose situation cries out, “If you are willing, you can make us clean. If you are willing, you can embrace us, too.” Compassion happens when we answer those cries with an “I am willing! Be clean! We are willing! Come on in!”

It was compassion that stirred within the hearts of members of this church to begin ministries like Helping Hands and the local Habitat for Humanity chapter. It was compassion that saw a need for ministry to the growing Hispanic population in Georgetown. A few weeks ago someone was in my office asking if Georgetown Presbyterian Church would be willing to sponsor the construction of a portable single-family dwelling that can be used to house an elderly couple somewhere in the county; it will be compassion that says “Yes” to that kind of project.

Compassion means more than waiting on the sidelines. Compassion means more than sending wishes of goodwill toward those whose lives are broken. Compassion means saying “I am willing!” and getting involved in the name of Christ.

Do you remember the man who kept calling the wrong number? Finally he figured out that the only reason the voice on the other end would keep hanging up is that nobody ever called him. After the fourth hang-up, the police officer called the number one more time. The voice on the other end of the line asked, “What do you want now?”

The police officer said, “I just called to say hello.”

“Hello? Why?”

“Well,” said the officer, “if nobody ever calls you, I thought maybe I should.”

There are people in our community who are on the outside, looking in. There are people whom everyone else has abandoned, or left for lost. If there is anybody who should reach out to them, shouldn't it be the church?

Because you see, compassion is something we do.

Amen.

¹ Thomas Troeger, “Preaching the Lesson,” *Lectionary Homiletics*, February 2000, p. 15.

² James 2:15b-16