

COMPASSION

A lawyer was being driven around town in his limo when he saw 2 men on the side of the road eating grass. Moved, the lawyer tells his driver to stop and gets out to talk to the men.

"What is going on? Why are you eating grass?" he asks the men.

"We are very poor men, sir", the first responds, "this is all we have."

"Well, come with me" insists the lawyer. "I have much. I will help you."

"But sir, I also have a wife and three kids! My friend here, he has a wife and four kids!"

"No problem. We will go get them as well – and any other relatives who are down on their luck." declares the lawyer.

An hour later they are all driving in the limo to the lawyer's estate -- a sprawling mansion in the finest of neighborhoods.

"Sir, I don't know how to thank you enough!"

"Oh, it is no problem. The grass at my house has to be at least a foot tall! It needed a trim anyway!"

Compassion. The lawyer was NOT very compassionate. He was thinking about what he could get done for him, not what he could do for the people he encountered. It's like the true story of the wealthy Wisconsin executives who agreed to help some illegal aliens by employing them in their home. For years they held them hostage at substandard wages by threatening to report them to the authorities for being illegally in the country. They were pretending to help the poor while paying them \$1.75 an hour.

Today as we consider that quality, compassion, we begin by asking ourselves, what is compassion? How would you define it?

The dictionary says this: "a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering." The literal word origin means: "to feel along with."

Throughout the scriptures we see compassion listed over and over again as a quality of God. Despite man's sinfulness, God continues to "feel along with them." Listen, for instance, to this familiar passage from the Psalmist:

8 The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.
9 He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever;
10 he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.
11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
12 as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
13 As a father has compassion on his children,
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;

Compassion. “Feeling along with.” It was God’s compassion that caused Him to keep giving the Israelites chance after chance to trust in Him and follow His will – and it was His compassion that kept coming back, when they failed, and making new and different ways to help them grow. Compassion fueled his forgiveness. Compassion fueled His generosity. Compassion enabled him to keep showering His blessings on a people who didn’t deserve it.

Unfortunately, compassion is also one of the qualities that seems awfully elusive to us humans who are so concerned about ourselves. We have a tendency to see things through our own needs, plans, and purposes, and we act, more often than not, in ways that meet our needs and fit into our plans rather than considering the way things affect others.

Consider the story of Jonah. Called by God to preach a word of judgment to the people of Nineveh, Jonah heads in the other direction. Why? Because he doesn’t like the people of Nineveh and he is afraid that God will be compassionate and forgive them.

Nevertheless, after a little detour in the belly of a big fish, Jonah goes out and does his job. But when the Ninevites listen to his preaching and repent of their sin, Jonah, instead of rejoicing, sits in the sun, angry at God and filled with more compassion for a plant he has taken a liking to than for the foreigners that had left their sinful ways and turned to God. Jonah’s prejudices and self-centeredness blinded him from real compassion.

Similarly, we think of Jesus’ story of the workers in the vineyard. Some worked a whole day, while others worked merely an hour. When the first ones, who worked the longest, get their pay, they are thrilled with the generosity of their employer. Thrilled, that is, until those who worked only one hour get paid the same wage as them. Instead of appreciating the generosity given to them, they now are filled with resentment and bitterness: “How come THAT GUY got the same amount of money as me?”

That's exactly the kind of thing Satan likes to do to us. He loves to get us to focus on us and our feelings and needs so that we are blinded from caring about the needs and feelings of others.

Jesus, however, comes to make things new. Consider the way our Lord was while he was here on earth. With whom did he spend much of his time? Was he like us, who choose primarily to hang around with people who are like us – economically, socially, spiritually? -- who view our relationships, often, with the attitude, "What's in it for me?"

No. Not at all. Jesus was often found with tax-collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners! He didn't let their spiritual uncleanness or lack of worth blind him from caring. Quite the opposite, He saw their need and made it His priority to be with them.

It was the same with so many of His miracles. Jesus was not swayed by the ugliness of the disease nor did he worry about how his touch might be viewed by others. Instead, He touched the leper, performed healing to the demon-possessed, and brought life and health even to the foreigner and alien.

Over and over again we see Jesus paying more attention to the needs of others than to Himself. Even when He looks out over the city of Jerusalem, the hotbed of false religiosity, where the Pharisees and Scribes were continually opposing His acts of love, Jesus declares:
37"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. 38Look, your house is left to you desolate. 39For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

But the most dramatic image of Jesus compassion is seen in Jesus' work of rescue. How can He, who is God in the flesh, care enough for sinners like us to be willing to walk in our humble shoes, to carry our dirtiness and guilt on His own back, to pay the penalty for sins He didn't commit, to die the death for sinners who would crucify Him and to raise from the dead to bring life we who deserved it not? It is an unfathomable, unbelievable compassion. And so, St. Paul declares to us:

5Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
6Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
7but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
8And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—

even death on a cross!
9Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
10that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

You see what St. Paul is saying? Fueled by the love and compassion of our wonderful Savior, he calls us to be a people of compassion – to look out into that world of selfishness, greed, and jealousy, and to say with Jesus, “I am willing. I will go.” For Jesus it meant taking up His cross. For us, perhaps it can be describe the same way: taking up our cross, sacrificing ourselves, giving, sharing, sowing and loving even, perhaps, to the point of discomfort.

Sometimes we comfortable Americans trifle at compassion. We send a few dollars here or there or offer quickly spoken prayers hardly thinking. We, perhaps, volunteer some of our time or offer a word of hope. But often we just scrape the surface. It’s a little like the joke I read in the Readers Digest:

A man bought a bird, but after a week it hadn’t spoken. So he went back to the pet shop. “Try getting him a mirror,” the owner suggested. “They love to look at themselves. That will get him talking.” The man bought the mirror but the bird still refused to speak. A week later, the man went back to the pet store.

“Okay, try this bell,” the owner advised. “The music will bring out the talker in him.” A week later the man returned.

“He finally said something!” he told the store owner. “He looked in his mirror, rang his bell, said a few words, then dropped dead off his perch.”

“Oh no!” the owner yelled. “What did he say?”

“He said, ‘Doesn’t that pet shop have any birdseed?’”

Too often that’s the way it is with us. Our compassion contributes more to our own feelings of self-worth than it does to the real needs of God’s people.

And that's not so bad, as a start. But I believe Jesus is calling us all to a deeper compassion – a compassion so like His that when we look out at the world we see not just the sea of things that we can get and want, but rather the sea of needs that cry out for our attention – a sea that so pierces our heart that we want to do more than just our level of personal comfort. We yearn to dig deeper, to do more, to challenge ourselves in ways we never dreamed.

May God give us such eyes of compassion and may His love touch lives through the fingers he has placed on our hands. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.