



“The Challenges of Being the Church: 2. Being a Compassionate Church”

Texts: Psalm 103 and Colossians 3:12-17

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Last week we began our summer sermon series with the preamble that while the series title says, “The Challenges of Being *The* Church,” we are really focusing on “The Challenges of Being *This* Church.” Our series is designed to provoke and initiate conversations about who we are, who God is calling us to be, and how we do the work of building God’s kingdom here-and-now.

Last week, we were reminded that, as the prophet wrote,
But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into
exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you
will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:7)

We have been called to be a “downtown church” and even when we had the opportunity to leave the downtown, we felt the call to stay. As our city develops and is revitalized, we – as a downtown congregation – can be a part of that renewing work and, in the process, find ourselves renewed.

This week, let’s start a conversation about “being a compassionate church.” It’s not that we aren’t already. It’s just that we live in such uncompassionate times and the ideas of consideration, care, and kindness are far too absent from our nation and the world. Our world has become a cold, indifferent, and even a mean-spirited place. That is not what God created the world – and all that call it home – to be.

When you look at the word *compassion*, you’ll discover that it is formed of two Latin words: com/con: meaning “with” and passio: meaning “suffering.” To have compassion for someone is to, literally, suffer with that person. To have compassion is to enter into the suffering of another human being, or a group of human beings, or, take

it even further, to enter into the suffering of any sentient, conscious being. Compassion is different from empathy, in which we understand another's situation and feelings. Compassion is different from sympathy, in which we may feel for what another is feeling.

Compassion asks us to go to a place in our hearts and minds that we do not want to go. Pema Chödrön, a Buddhist nun and well-known author, tells us:

Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present in the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity.¹

Compassion for one who is sick requires us to remember when we were sick: what it felt like, the pain, the frustration, the anger, the impatience. Compassion for one who mourns requires us to willingly walk back into the valley of the shadow and remember the sadness, the aloneness, the loss, the pain, the heartbreak. Compassion requires more of us than ascent or understanding. Henri Nouwen tells us:

Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion into the condition of being human.

So, why are talking about this? Simply because compassion is a God-thing.

Rabbi Mazo reminded us a few weeks back that we are created in the image of God. That means that the qualities of God's character and being are to be present in our character and being. In the Psalm for the day, we were reminded:

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness.

Compassionate is who God is. God entered into our suffering in the person of Jesus Christ to be with us in the muck and mire of our broken humanity.

In the New Testament lesson from the Letter to the Colossians, we are instructed to

...clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

Among the qualities of authentic Christian living we find our word: compassion. We are to wear it like we wear our clothing. I hope we are agreed that we would never go out of our house without our clothes. In the same way, we are to never be without compassion, for this is at the heart of being a true disciple of Jesus Christ.

Presbyterian minister and author, Frederick Buechner was said:

Compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live inside somebody else's skin. It's the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too.

As God put on our skin, in the selfless act we call the incarnation, and lived among us in the midst of our brokenness, showing us the way to wholeness, we are called to put on the skin of those around us who are broken and dispirited, and lead them in the way of wholeness.

And that is never easy. If it were, the world would be such a lovely place.

Andrew Boyd reminds us:

Compassion hurts. When you feel connected to everything, you also feel responsible for everything. And you cannot turn away. Your destiny is bound with the destinies of others.

You must either learn to carry the Universe or be crushed by it. You must grow strong enough to love the world, yet empty enough to sit down at the same table with its worst horrors.²

In his book, Boyd is actually trying to be sarcastic. But he has spoken the truth. Compassion hurts and we would just as soon avoid it if at all possible.

Compassion leaves us vulnerable. Compassion places us in arenas of discomfort. Compassion bids us to go against the current of the world around us. Compassion calls us to a life with which the world is totally unfamiliar.

The philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer told us "compassion is the basis of morality." Authentic moral living requires compassion. It is the heartbeat of principled living, a notion that too often escapes the notice of those in places of authority. If you're looking to change the world, compassion is a pretty good place to start.

But it's more than that. Compassion means that we lead with our hearts, even at times when our minds tells us to do otherwise. There are times when compassion doesn't make fiscal sense. Compassion can put us in the place of choosing between doing for ourselves or doing for another. To the calloused heart, there is no choice at all: you do for yourself. But, to the compassionate heart, the choice is more challenging, for in entering into the pain and suffering of another, we may experience our own pain and suffering.

John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress* and so much more, told us "you have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you." Compassion is never a *quid pro quo* – a "this for that" – "I'll scratch your back and you scratch mine." More often than not, compassionate living will exact a cost from us that we will never see returned.

Sometimes that cost is financial. Sometimes we must give some of what we have in order that others can have something of their own. Our giving through the church seeks to be a channel through which compassion can flow into the world in the form of good news, food, clean water, shelter, healing, education, justice, and bringing wholeness to the broken of the world.

Sometimes that cost is social. Sometimes practicing compassion upsets our family and friends, because it is so counter-cultural. Remember Mark Twain's statement: "Always do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest." And add to it this: and sometimes it will upset and anger a few more.

Compassion is not without its consequences. There's your warning.

That the world is a broken and hurting place is no news. But if there world is to find wholeness and healing, it will be up to the church - and this church - to be practitioners of compassion in new and bold ways. Too many churches and denominations are too willing to reflect the unfriendliness and enmity that exists in the world.

First Presbyterian Church must continue to be - and discover new ways of being - a place where compassion is the norm. We must guard against the cynicism and distrust so present in our world - both in the church and in society. We must give ourselves away to those who are sick, who are hungry, who are lonely, who are the subject of discrimination, who are broken in heart, who are held captive in addiction, and those are rejected by those who should love them most. We must continue to be willing "to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless."

And let's close with this. The Dalai Lama offers us this instruction: "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion." "...Clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." It's what the best dressed folks are sporting this season. Compassion. For now and evermore. Amen.

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- 1) Pema Chödrön, *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times*
 - 2) Andrew Boyd, *Daily Afflictions: The Agony of Being Connected to Everything in the Universe*