



# “The Wisdom of Compassion”

Text: Proverbs 22:15, 22-25

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

I was mesmerized, this past week, watching the nation say its farewell to Congressman John Robert Lewis. An American icon in every sense of that word, Lewis spent his entire adult life - from the age of 20 - serving the singular cause of securing equal rights for all people. He was eulogized by so many voices - from preachers to presidents - that I will not attempt to add anything to what was said so eloquently by my betters. But I was stuck by a statement by Jon Meachem, Lewis' biographer, who said, “John Lewis was a saint. Saints aren't perfect. They're just better than the rest of us.” Meachem has the annoying propensity to always say the right thing in the right way.

With the benefit of the extensive reporting surrounding Lewis' passing, and his remarkable essay to all of us in the New York Times, published by instruction on the day of his funeral, I am taken by the way in which Lewis lived his life. A proponent of non-violence, a student of James Lawson - himself a student of Ghandi - an ordained Baptist minister, leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, a partner with Martin Luther King, Jr., leader of the march from Selma to Montgomery, youngest speaker at the March on Washington, a 17-term congressman representing metro-Atlanta - he was, as Raphael Warnock, pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church reminded us, that like the suffering servant of Isaiah,

...he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.

Would that more of us could live a life as consequential as the life of John Lewis.

Central to that life was compassion. Constructed from two ancient Latin words, the word itself means “to suffer with.” Compassion means entering into the suffering of another - even at the cost of suffering yourself. Compassion means understanding first-hand, from the very depths of one’s soul, what another person is going through - experiencing - and living each moment of each day. Compassion is one of the fullest expressions of a life centered on that well-known, but little lived, commandment: “to love your neighbor as yourself.”

The word from God contained in the Proverb is clear:

Do not rob the poor because they are poor,  
or crush the afflicted at the gate,  
for the Lord pleads their cause  
and despoils of life those who despoil them.

To not take advantage of the poor, the afflicted, those who have already been victimized, those who have known persecution, those who have been made less than human by the color of their skin - this is the beginning of true compassion. To join them in their suffering, to take their pain upon ourselves, to walk with them in their pain - this is compassion. This is the way of God.

Do I need to tell you we are living in an uncompassionate world? And that is, in fact, generous, because lack of compassion is to be indifferent or uncaring. Our world has become hateful and spiteful. It has become coarse and mean. We are further from “the beloved community” of Lewis and King’s vision than we have been in decades.

We seem to prefer division instead of unity. We take pleasure in attaching labels to people - tagging them as acceptable or unacceptable according to our standards and proclivities. We argue over inanities and trivialities, while allowing truth and justice to disappear. We have become the people my Scottish ancestors described as will “fight at the drop of a hat and carry a hat for the dropping.”

We have become cynical and bitter. We rarely have anything good to say about anything and, instead, nit-pick and bicker and carp about nearly everything. We have become a soured and acidified people. As old Jerry Clower used to say, it appears that we were weaned on persimmon juice.

We have succumbed to the worst of our human tendencies. Our hearts have hardened into stone. Our love is reserved for those who mirror our opinions and views and our hatred is kindled toward those who do not agree with us.

And we have become violent. We may not strike with the hand, or discharge a weapon at another, but our language has become violent. Our thoughts have taken on brutal patterns. Our opinions have a vicious and unrestrained tone. We choose our words to inflict as much damage as possible. It almost - almost - makes you think John Calvin was on to something, when he wrote:

Let it stand, therefore, as an indubitable truth, which no engines can shake, that the mind of man is so entirely alienated from the righteousness of God that he cannot conceive, desire, or design any thing but what is wicked, distorted, foul, impure, and iniquitous; that his heart is so thoroughly envenomed by sin that it can breathe out nothing but corruption and rottenness; that if some men occasionally make a show of goodness, their mind is ever interwoven with hypocrisy and deceit, their soul inwardly bound with the fetters of wickedness.

Beloved, we have fallen far from the image of God in which we were created. We have marred the beauty and wonder of God's creation in the human race.

But...

God's voice still calls us back to the better and more perfect way:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleannesses, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. I will make the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field abundant, so that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. - Ezk. 36:26-30

If ever there were a people in need of heart transplant, it is us. The heart of stone - the heart of hatred, indifference, division, and deceit - the stony heart of malice and cruelty - must be replaced with the warm and living heart of love, justice, acceptance, and compassion.

As with any heart surgery, this will not be painless. We will have to face up to things we have chosen to ignore for far too long. We will need to face our privilege and power - in many of our cases, our whiteness. We will need to understand that power of racism that is intrinsically woven into the fabric of our nation and our practice. We will need to own up to the subtle prejudices and jaundiced views we have carried and practiced for longer than we may even be aware. We will, of necessity, need to make apologies and do everything we can to make things right. This is not easy, painless work, beloved, but it is the work to which we are called as children of God.

And when the heart of stone is removed and the heart of flesh is implanted, we will need extensive rehabilitation. That's where the hard work really begins. This heart rehabilitation will demand of us moving from interior improvement to exterior change. Our new hearts will require us to move into the world - to be agents of reconciliation and justice. Our new heart will cause us to live in compassionate ways with everyone we meet - without distinction and without discrepancy.

In this way, we can become God's compassionate people. We can reflect God's own heart to the world. We can - and we must - live into the suffering of the world, for only then will oppression's murderous hand be lifted from the poor and hatred's lethal knee be removed from the neck of the afflicted.

It is at this Table that we begin. By bringing into our bodies the simple bread and wine, we are drawn into the presence of God in Jesus Christ and nourished for the transformative work to which God calls us. At this Table, the world begins to be changed - because we are invited to change. And as change leads to change, the wave of compassion grows into a tsunami of love that will envelop the earth, drowning all that is unjust and unjustifiable, washing away all that is not of God and the way of God.

There is wisdom in the way of compassion. Compassion draws us closer to each other, which - in turn - draws us closer to God. Compassion is the way to justice. Compassion is the way to peace. Compassion is the way to wholeness. Compassion is the foundation upon which we can build "the beloved community."

Compassion.

For now and evermore. Amen.



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