

July 18, 2021

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Mark 6:30-34

“He Had Compassion”

As [Jesus] went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd...” This morning I want to reflect on the subject of compassion. I think it’s significant that Mark pointed out the compassion Jesus had for the crowd in today’s gospel reading.

Compassion literally means “to suffer together.” It is defined as the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another’s suffering and feel compelled to relieve that suffering. Compassion is related to responses like empathy and sympathy, but it includes being motivated to act on behalf of another. The Dalai Lama once brought it closer to home. He said, “If you want to know what compassion is, look into the eyes of a mother or father as they cradle their sick and fevered child.”

I was fascinated to learn that scientists have started to map the biological basis of compassion. They suggest it has an important evolutionary purpose. Author Dacher Keltner explains that when early humans started walking upright on the plains of Africa, the pelvis narrowed and the birth canal narrowed. As they developed abilities with language, music, and symbolic representation, the cerebral cortex got bigger.

As a result, human babies are born long before being fully developed, making them entirely dependent. Keltner describes human babies as the most vulnerable offspring in the world. Those of you with grown children might appreciate this. He jokes that it takes a human 7-49 years to reach the state of independence. All this to say that the compassion dynamic between parent and child is essential for human survival. They claim we evolved into a super care-giving species.

However, in an opinion piece that appeared in Scientific American back in September, not a particularly touchy-feely publication, the authors argued the U.S. has a compassion deficit. They claimed that, these days, Americans seem particularly indifferent and they gave some reasons. We’re all dealing with a lot of stuff. More than a year of air hugs, masked conversations, and preoccupation with our own struggles takes a toll.

They cited a recent Gallup poll indicating a third of the country doesn’t think there is a problem with race relations, which they see as an indication many aren’t grasping other people’s perspectives. As contributing factors leading to the compassion deficit, the

authors cite differing attitudes regarding the pandemic, economic insecurity, and political polarization.

Last week, I think I got a glimpse of this compassion deficit. After flying into Logan Airport, I got on a bus to take me to my car. It stopped at all the terminals on the way. At one point, there was an older gentleman standing in the street, blocking the bus driver from pulling next to the curb. I'm guessing he was homeless. He had no bags and nothing on his person.

When the door opened and the gentleman climbed on the bus, he was mumbling to himself and seemed disoriented. As the bus driver began yelling at him for standing in the wrong place, a couple of us helped the man to a seat. It was clear that berating this man wasn't going to accomplish anything. What he needed was a helping hand.

I think it may be true that we are living through a moment when compassion is in short supply. Empathy and the motivation to respond to the needs of others can be hard to muster when you're dealing with a lot in your own life, which is why I think today's gospel lesson is very timely.

Jesus and his disciples had been busy and traveling. They needed rest, so they decided to retreat. They set out in a boat for a deserted place. However, some people saw them going and they hurried on foot on order to beat them to the spot. People from all the surrounding towns arrived ahead of them.

Have you ever gone somewhere hoping for solitude only to find a crowd? On my recent vacation, I was hiking with a friend in Yosemite National Park. In Yosemite, the mountains are so majestic and the views are breathtaking. As my friend and I were hiking, a group came down the trail, one of which was blasting ghastly music from a boom box attached to the outside of his backpack. It was exactly the kind of thing I go into nature to get away from.

Have you ever gone for a relaxing day at the beach only to find, with the parking and the crowds, it was everything but relaxing? I don't know if I would have been as patient with the crowd as Jesus was. They set out in a boat for a deserted place. There, on the shore, was a crowd of needy people.

Mark tells us, "As [Jesus] went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things." They could have turned the crowd away. They would have been within their rights to do that. Instead, Jesus had compassion. As I picture this scene, I imagine the

initial annoyance of having their deserted place being overrun turning to joy as Jesus engages with the crowd and meets their needs.

In the Gospels, compassion is always linked with joyful events. In Luke's gospel, Jesus encountered a widow grieving the death of her only son. Luke wrote, "When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep.'" Jesus touched the young man's casket. Immediately, he sat up and began to speak.

In Matthew's gospel, when Jesus passed by two blind men sitting by the roadside, they cried out and asked that their eyes might be opened. Matthew wrote, "Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him."

I think this is a timely message for us. It indicates that compassion isn't something to demonstrate only when it's convenient. It's not enough to put compassion on the back burner until the day our own struggles subside, a day that may or may not ever come. Compassion makes everything better. Responding to the suffering of others is a source of joy and satisfaction.

The question is, how do we not let this compassion deficit get the best of us? How do we muster compassion when it doesn't come easy? One way to do it is to volunteer. Spend a couple hours volunteering at a food pantry or a shelter. Go on a service trip. We need to be in the business of putting ourselves in positions to encounter people in need of kindness. There's nothing like assisting someone else in their need to give us a new perspective on our own struggles.

Another way to cultivate compassion is to really listening to people. On the CBS Evening News, on Friday, they did a story on Al Nixon. He reached a point in his life when he needed a quiet place to clear his head. He began spending the early morning hours of each day sitting in on a bench, in a park, in St Petersburg FL.

The last thing he wanted was to hear other people's problems, but people started talking to him. He's such a good listener that, every day, people go to the park hoping to spend a little time with him. Nixon said, "Listening is the #1 skill that humankind needs to know how to do very well." He started going to the park because he sought a deserted place. The joy of his life has become listening to others. What a great way to cultivate compassion!

Lastly, and maybe the best way to cultivate compassion is to be aware of the compassion we've received. It's easier to be compassionate towards others when we remember that somewhere along life's journey, someone showed us compassion.

I remember when I made the decision to pursue ordained ministry. I applied to seminary at the Boston University School of Theology. They had standards and criteria for acceptance into the program. Let's just say my application would have made me one of the more marginal candidates. I didn't have the best grade point average in my undergraduate studies. I went to college to be a gym teacher. I had never taken a class in religion. I was broke. I had no idea how I was going to pay for three years of graduate school.

The Director of Admissions at the time was a gentleman by the name of Earl Beane. He called me at one point and said, "Eric, I have your application here, but I haven't received all your references." To this day, I don't believe Earl ever received all my references. But as questionable as my application was, Earl Beane admitted me into the program. He gave me the benefit of the doubt.

I want to have compassion for others, because I know, time and time again, people have demonstrated compassion for me. I believe God's desire is for human beings to treat one another with compassion. Compassion is at the heart of the gospel message.

To quote the Dalai Lama again, "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion."