



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

Sue Hamilton - July 29, 2018 Sermon

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## **The Movement of Compassion Awareness, Attitude, Action**

Text: "When he saw the crowds he had compassion for them." —Matthew 9:36a

Years ago when our children were little, I remember a special expression that would come across my husband's face when either one of them did or said something that especially touched him. "The look" as I referred to it was a reflection of his love and also his pride. The funny thing is he was not aware of it. In fact, I am probably the only one who ever noticed it. As the kids grew this tender expression appeared less and less, not that his love for them changed, it is just with increased independence and activity the wonder of those early years where so many moments seem to have a touch of the miraculous, inevitably fades. So too did it in my memory, until Evie and Benjamin came along. I have to tell you I was delighted to see "the look" return, this time as a papa.

These memories resurfaced this week reflecting on our gospel lesson. Jesus has just given voice to a demoniac that was mute, completely restoring his life, a short scene culminating a series of healing events. The crowd is amazed, but the Pharisees are quick to conclude that Jesus must be possessed too. Undeterred, he moves on, preaching, healing, teaching. He touches people one by one but each encounter just brings more. Looking out among a sea of faces he pauses. There is so much need. Moved by their condition he is filled with compassion. Harassed and helpless, as Matthew describes, they are like sheep without a shepherd. There is no one to lead or care for them.

How do you imagine the look on Jesus' face? Was it one of gentle reassurance? Was there observable sadness or longing etched into his brow? Did the disciple's notice any of these feelings? Were they aware of the vast amount of hurt around them? Did they understand the many layers of suffering that often occur beyond a presenting condition? Could they pick out the outcasts, the broken, in body, mind or spirit? Jesus could. He understood the language of sorrow which is why, one writer comments, that so many hurting people were drawn to him. People who knew they didn't measure up to society's expectations of whom they were supposed to be.<sup>1</sup> Around Jesus their burden is lifted. Feelings of hurt and rejection are overlaid with love and acceptance.

Are we any different than the people in the crowd? We may or may not think of ourselves as outcasts but we have or will at some point or another be broken in body, mind or spirit. We get caught up in society's expectations of what it means to be successful or what constitutes loving relationship. We know the struggle of disease, illness and loss, of addiction and depression, accidents and their aftermath, laws of exclusion, loneliness, self-worth, stressed or broken relationships, the con-

sequences of mistakes made, and the wondering of how we will meet financial obligations and family need or whether there will be enough at the end. We may not live on land where sheep graze but we are not without need of a shepherd.

Where is comfort to be found? It is often first reflected in the faces or in the words of those around us. A friend shared such an occurrence this week. Recalling a time when she was troubled about one of her children she was shopping in a store, mindlessly going through a rack of clothing when a voice from behind, said, "Hello, my name is Hope. Can I help you?" Without thinking she replied, "Everyone needs Hope." Then, she said to me, "I am certain that God sent her to me at that moment when I needed Hope the most."

We are called to be the sent ones of God. At times this calling is in response to a direct or divine invitation but mostly it results from God's love moving in and around us, expressed in the everyday; as Joyce Rupp suggests, through the avenues of awareness, attitude and action.<sup>2</sup>

A silly example perhaps but one which I think conveys this rhythm. Years ago when we lived in Omaha, and spring was in the air and flowers were growing, a dry period occurred and watering was needed. On the side of our house was a spicket and resting above it a rack that held a hose. Going to connect the hose I noticed a bird had nested on the rack and immediately stepped away. Checking back regularly and observing her continual presence I was sure that the nest contained eggs. A slight inconvenience I found other ways to do watering until the eggs hatched and the baby birds took flight. It was a joy to observe this process along with the children. Awareness coupled with attitude determined action.

"English author Margaret Silf recounts the experience of a driver using a toll road for their travel to work. This commuter told her that every morning he noticed five toll booths with short lines, and a sixth one with a long line. He wondered about this and learned that the long line was due to the person working in that particular toll booth. This worker took a personal interest in each driver that passed by. Without fail, he greeted everyone warmly asking how they and their families were doing. One recipient of this kindness was a driver who had lost his glasses using a spare. The compassionate toll-booth worker noticed this and expressed concern. Even the driver's own family had not been aware of the loss. Silf concludes: 'Such was the power of this 'one' that harassed drivers would line up, adding five or ten minutes to their commute, simply to be refreshed by this man's friendly words and authentic kindness.'"<sup>3</sup>

Compassion may be given through simple gestures as with the stories just told, but at other times it requires much more, a sacrifice of self so that the needs of another might be met. Families who care for a loved one for years, parents or grandparents who raise a special needs child, choosing or being forced to choose to live with less so that education or medical care or other needed reality might be met. Compassion calls us to give beyond the ties of immediate family and to offer our time and gifts so that suffering in its myriad of forms might be lessened. The practice of compassion expands our understanding and increases awareness to the struggle of others. As someone shared with me this week, empathy is the ability to genuinely understand another's challenges/life

situation. It's a feeling and thought. Compassion on the other hand is the active expression of the empathy and doing something to help. The more complex a situation or hardship, greater is the need for a team of people to work together to provide care or foster change.

Joyce Rupp writes, "We exist in a world of interconnectedness. We are not isolated individuals, even if we may feel that way at times. The suffering of one affects the suffering of all. What we think and feel about people who are suffering, especially if they do not match our notions of how they ought to believe and act, greatly affects our response."<sup>4</sup>

Nothing shapes our attitude and response more than the transforming love of God deepening in our lives. Jack Kornfield shares a story from the Jewish mystical tradition:

"A great rabbi taught his disciples to memorize and contemplate the teaching and to place the prayers and holy words on their hearts. One day a student asked the rabbi why he always used the phrase 'on your heart' and not 'in your heart.' The master replied, 'Only time and grace can put the essence of these stories in your heart. Here we recite and learn them and put them on our hearts hoping that some day when our hearts break they will fall in.'"<sup>5</sup>

No one wants a hurt or broken heart or wishes it upon another. But what we cultivate and nourish on a regular basis creates a well from which we can draw when life is difficult. The intentional nurture of faith is important.

Here I think it important to insert a fourth component to the movement of compassion, and that is rest. Joyce Rupp writes, "If we fail to tend to the 'lure of God' within us, the endless information about suffering on our planet saturates our spirit with discouragement. Joy, beauty, happiness, gratitude, understanding, and a sense of purpose and meaning—these await our reception if we turn in their direction. We lose hope if our only focus on suffering. To retain energy and strength in expressing compassion day by day, we must have balance."<sup>6</sup> She goes on to explain a personal practice she engages in frequently by addressing in her journal this question: "What do I want to remember from yesterday?" or if time for personal reflection occurs at the end of the day, "What do I want to remember from today?" She says that she is often surprised by the good overlooked by getting caught in the not-so-good, missing some gesture of kindness when rushing to get something done, losing the melody of a lovely songbird when too preoccupied on the phone. Taking time to recapture what has soothed the mind or restored the spirit can be a helpful practice of rest.

Jesus said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Westminster is a caring church family that strives to listen for God's holy invitations in the engaging of compassionate ministry and in how we spend the resources entrusted to us. All that we do is the result of God's spirit working through our hands and feet, our words and our songs, our meetings and events, our trips and our outreach, our listening and our teaching. Today you were reminded of one way compassion is shared through our

Prayer Shawl ministry. Immediately following worship a church bus will be parked on First Street where a deacon will be there to explain our Sunday bus ministry and the need that exists for additional drivers. This coming week the church will be busy, full of adults, children, and youth, learning and growing together as they gather each for MADD camp. These are just some of the ways in which we as a church family seek to convey “the look” of compassion.

In a few moments we will be sharing together the Lord’s Supper, the gift of compassion unparalleled. In preparing for this meditation I shared with the Board of Deacons a week ago my sermon text and asked them if they wished, to reflect on two questions; what does it mean to look at another with compassion? And secondly, how has Jesus looked upon you with compassion? Feeling brave I sent the same request to our Stephen ministers and Church Partners. I was blessed this week by many thoughtful responses, each that helped shaped the writing of this meditation, so in truth, this is a community effort. Perhaps as you are given the bread and the cup today you might wish to reflect on these questions as well.

St. John of the Cross writes, “I saw the river over which every soul must pass to reach the kingdom of heaven, and the name of that river was suffering; and I saw the boat which carries souls across the river, and the name of that boat was love.”<sup>7</sup> May that which we are about as individuals and a church family help transport others across the water. Amen.

<sup>1</sup>Shirley Hobson Duncanson, “Jesus Had Compassion on Them,” [shirleyhobsonduncanson.com/2018/06/03](http://shirleyhobsonduncanson.com/2018/06/03).

<sup>2</sup>Joyce Rupp, *Boundless Compassion, Creating a Way of Life* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2018), 15.

<sup>3</sup>Margaret Silf, “The Power of One,” *America*, July 6, 2009.

<sup>4</sup>Joyce Rupp, *Boundless Compassion, Creating a Way of Life* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2018), 15.

<sup>5</sup>Joyce Rupp, *Boundless Compassion, Creating a Way of Life* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2018), 87.

<sup>6</sup>Joyce Rupp, *Boundless Compassion, Creating a Way of Life* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2018), 184.

<sup>7</sup> St. John of the Cross, “River of Suffering,” posted by Dan Burke, February 28, 2012, at <http://www.spiritualdirection.com/2012/02/28/river-of-suffering-st-john-of-the-cross>.