

## A COMMUNITY OF COMPASSION: Sympathy and Outrage

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Theme: The intersection of the compassion of Christ in us with the brokenness of people is an indication of where we might serve the world.

Texts: Hebrews 4:15; Matthew 9:36; Luke 19:41; Luke 15:20; Mark 1:40-41; John 11:33-38, 43

Series: Get a Life...Give it Away

Have you heard the parable that illustrates the difference between heaven and hell? In both heaven and hell, people are sitting at a banquet table overflowing with food. In both scenarios, everyone seated at the table has splints on their arms that cannot be removed. Since you cannot bend your arms at the elbow it is impossible to feed yourself. In hell everyone is starving. But in heaven the banquet guests have discovered that the way to enjoy the spread is to feed the person across from you at the table. Each serves another, and all receive what they need.

Last Sunday we began a four-part series on Christian servanthood by observing Jesus' dramatic example of servanthood, the washing of his disciples' feet. Servanthood begins among the people of God. How can we say we have anything to offer to an unbelieving world, if we can't offer service on bended knee to each other? Jesus said it clearly, **"By this all men will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another" (John 13:35)**. What does this love look like? It looks like a willingness to take on the most menial and demeaning of roles that only an outcast Gentile slave was expected to do—wash the grimy sandal shod feet of a fellow disciple. Jesus gave us this example and then said as clearly as one can say, **"Do as I have done for you."**

We are exploring this month some of the dimensions of the church as a serving community. I have summarized this with the theme: **"Get A Life...Give It Away"**. We individually and corporately as a church only find life as we lose it in service to Christ, one another and the world. Our theme is simply an echo of Jesus' call to discipleship, **"whoever loses his life for me shall find it" (Luke 9:24b)**

But if we were to follow Jesus out of the church to the world for which he gave his life, what would service look like then? I want to propose that there is one word that captures the way Jesus interacted with his rebellious creation and therefore serves to shape the tilt of our hearts toward the world as well. It is the word **compassion**. My thesis this morning is that our service to the world is found at the intersection of the compassion of Christ in us and a place of brokenness in people's lives. So the question that I want you to take with you this morning is, **"Where does the compassion of Christ in you intersect with the brokenness of people's lives?"**

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So let's first understand the biblical meaning of compassion, especially as it was displayed in the life and heart of Jesus Christ. In the Hebrew understanding of human makeup, compassion emanates from the depths of one's being. Sometimes the word in the original language actually sounds like its meaning. In Greek, compassion is *splagnxizomai*. Doesn't this have the feel of a deep seated emotion? Compassion is associated with the guts or innards. In response to a deeply moving story, you might hear a Middle Easterner say, **"You are cutting up my intestines."** Compassion is associated with a clutch in the stomach or a gut reaction.

Jesus will serve as our model for compassion as we follow him through the gospels. We will see that compassion is a blend of *sympathy and outrage*. First, there is a *sympathetic* identification with a person's plight coupled with an *outrage* at the external forces that have diminished a person's quality of life.

### Sympathy

The writer of Hebrews says of Jesus, **"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15)** The word for sympathy is *sunpathos*, which literally translated is to **"to feel or to suffer with."**

First, let's see sympathy in the ministry of Jesus: Whether it was observing the crowds or interaction with an individual, Jesus experienced the gut reaction of identification with their lostness. **"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36)** Pouring forth from deep inside was a spontaneous response toward the populace for what he saw was a clueless people. Mission in Jesus' name is motivated by the fellow-feeling of Jesus. Because he shares the suffering of the crowds, he institutes mission to them. They were *harassed and helpless*, literally *"mangled and cast down"*—*harassed* in that they were being led astray by religious leaders who were like the blind leading the blind; and they were *helpless* in that they were unable like a lost sheep to extricate themselves from danger. There were no shepherds to guide these sheep to green pastures and still waters. So he tells his disciples to pray that the Lord of the harvest will send workers into the harvest so that they have people to follow. On another occasion, Luke tells us, **"And when he drew near and saw the city (of Jerusalem) he wept over it..." (Luke 19:41)** **"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem."** These were not crocodile tears that welled up in the corner of the eye and when it reached sufficient volume trickled down his cheek. No, Jesus burst into tears. Jesus' body convulsed in soul sobbing agony

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over a people who did not know the hour of their visitation. They did not even know they were lost.

There is no greater expression of compassion than what the Father had for His prodigal son. The Father is deeply wounded by the younger son's demand to have his share of the inheritance before his father's death. But in an act of love, the Father cut his son loose to face life on his own, knowing the pain that awaited him in the far country. When the son had fallen so low that he was competing with the pigs for food to survive, the son realized that life is far better back home in His Father's house.

But what should the son expect upon his return home? Since the patriarch in the family has been shamed by the son who wished for his father's death, we might expect upon his return that the father would put the son in his place. Perhaps the Father would heap shame upon the son as the son had upon Him. ***"But while he [the son] was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him..." (15:20)*** Where was the father when the son returned? Safe at home ready to lower the boom? No, the father was on the road leading to the village, inspecting daily, waiting for his son to return. THE WAITING FATHER is not God cloistered in the heavens untouched by human pain. This is the God who comes to where we are.

What did the Father see that drew compassion? In an instant the Father saw the story of his life in the far country. Emaciated, gaunt appearance, disheveled, smelly clothes, head hung low, body dragging. The Father's reaction was to enter into and come alongside his son's pain.

To have sympathy is to have a common endured and shared experience—a fellowship of suffering. To sympathize is to be on the same frequency, heart beating next to someone else's heart, or to feel alongside.

I was given a story that illustrates human sympathy from a Christian heart. Karen was at the airport waiting to pick up her grandson before Christmas. Her attention was arrested by a sort of wild woman who marched to the ticket counter. She was a human in disarray. Boisterously, she made some mention to the woman behind the counter about being one of the top two swimmers in the world. It was meant for others to hear. She was upset over the delay of her flight. Quite demanding, she asked the counter attendant, ***"Can you watch my bags?"*** She was told that this was not allowed. She then wheeled her bags to the back-to-back rows of chairs. Two young boys were sitting behind her eating McDonald's French fries. She reached back and asked if she could have some saying to all around, ***"I like kids."*** By this time those hiding behind their newspapers were hoping she would not get any closer.

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Two security guards had been called to assess the situation and they concluded that she was rational. Karen, watching all of this, heard an inner voice, **"She hasn't taken her meds this morning."** She moved in closer to this human disarray in the now almost vacated area. Gently and calmly, Karen said to this disoriented woman, **"Have you taken your meds today? I'm wondering because you are acting like you haven't taken your meds."** Her demeanor changed instantly. She abandoned her tough persona, and became childlike. **"No, but they're way packed up in my suitcase."** Karen had heard she had a four hour wait so she urged her to open her bag. As she was fumbling through her bag, Karen went to get a bottle of water.

After she swallowed her pills, Karen asked, **"Someone meeting you in Detroit?"** **"Sure, My mom."** **"Well, then you really do want to be in good shape when she picks you up, don't you?"** She nodded yes. And then she said, **"Thank you for taking care of me."** Filled with a wave of compassion Karen hugged her and said, **"That's what we are here for, isn't it?"** **"Sure, we're here for one another."**

As Karen reflected on this encounter, she wondered why she was drawn to this woman when others were shying away. A gift of mercy, yes. A love for all God's creation, sure. But more. In Karen's words, **"You see, I have met this lady before. She has inhabited territory within me. We share *simpatico*, an understanding, a communal confusion—just hanging on."**

A poem reads, **"To mourn is to forget yourself for a moment and get lost in someone else's pain and then, to find yourself in the very act of getting lost."** This is what Karen experienced, what Jesus embodied and that act of identification with the brokenness of another is sign of our ministry.

### Outrage

Yet compassion is more than sympathy. Biblical compassion has a component of righteous outrage; it is an anger directed toward circumstances that have diminished the quality of a person's life.

The gospel of Mark records the story of a leper who approaches Jesus and begs him for healing. To have contracted leprosy, a disease that caused your skin to rot and lose all sensitivity to pain, was as bad as it could get in Jesus' day. It has been compared to AIDS in our time. These were the untouchables of the first century. Those with leprosy were required to dwell alone outside the city. They had to make themselves obvious by wearing torn clothes, a bare head, and as they went about they covered their lips while warning of their polluted presence by shouting "unclean, unclean." So it was very bold on a leper's part to approach Jesus, but from what he knew he must have seen Jesus' compassionate heart.

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First, he affirms Jesus' healing power, **"If you are willing, you can make me clean."** Mark gives us Jesus' response, **"Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man, 'I am willing'"** (Mark 1:41) A pastor friend of mine used to say, **"Watch the hands of Jesus."** He touched the leper. Who knows how long it had been since he had felt the solace of human contact? Sympathy. But then Jesus says, **"Be clean!"** There is a sense that Jesus unleashes a full force of moral fury against this leprosy that reduced this man's life to daily horror. You can almost hear the agony emerging somewhere deep down within Jesus' guts, **"This is not the way it is supposed to be."**

Let's turn to another familiar incident in Jesus' ministry. In John 11 we read the story of the death and rising of Lazarus. Jesus had become dear and loving friends of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. He stayed frequently in their home in Bethany, near Jerusalem. We are told that a message was sent to Jesus and his disciples that Lazarus was near death. But by the time Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been in the grave four days. Upon hearing that Jesus had finally come, Martha runs to meet him on the outskirts of the village. She wonders out loud why Jesus had not come earlier to heal Lazarus before he had died. Mary too approaches Jesus in tears over the loss of her brother. We read in **John 11:33**, **"When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled."** In this context, the Scripture says, **"Jesus wept."** **"Then the Jews said, 'See how he loved him.'"** We might think that all Jesus was feeling here was a sense of loss and shared grief with Mary and Martha. He shared their loss and felt his own. No more than sympathy.

But there is more going on here. In v. 38 we read, **"Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb."** The word translated **"deeply moved"**, is that same word used to describe a Greek stallion preparing for battle. It pictures a fighting horse, rearing back on its hind legs, pawing the air with muscles rippling, ready to enter the contest. John Calvin says of Jesus here, that he was a **"champion ready for conflict."** A more literal translation here would be, **"Jesus, snorting in spirit, came to the tomb."**

Os Guinness captures the moment like this, **"Entering his Father's world as the Son of God, he found not order, beauty, harmony and fulfillment, but fractured disorder, raw ugliness, complete disarray—everywhere the abortion of God's original plan. Standing at the graveside, he came face to face with death that symbolized and summarized the accumulation of evil, pain, sorrow, suffering, injustice, cruelty and despair. He was outraged by the outrageous abnormality of death."** (*The Dust of Death*, p. 385)

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**“This is not the way it is supposed to be.”** When Jesus called out, **“Lazarus, come forth”**, Jesus hurled himself into the teeth of all the pain, suffering, interruption, and sorrow death represented. As much as we believe that Jesus in his resurrection is the victory over death, and it wonderfully is, it is also a reminder that sin has entered this world and the result is death.

There is a redemptive side to anger. Love and anger are not incompatible. In fact, there is no love without anger toward the forces that corrupt and demean people’s lives.

I remember quite clearly the moment I was caught off guard with my own angry reaction to death. I was pastoring a small church in Burbank, CA in the late 1970’s and one of our members, Mildred Malm, was a delightful woman near 80. She was a renaissance woman. She was an attorney before females populated this profession. An art collector. Widely read. She always seemed to have something interesting and engaging to say about my sermons. One Sunday morning before worship, while I was still at home, the phone rang. Mildred’s brother was on the line. He reported to me that Mildred had been found dead in her home and had probably not been discovered for a couple of days. When I hung up the phone, I shouted audibly something I can’t repeat here. I noticed a geyser of emotion well up within me, that gut reaction fueled by anger. It caught me by surprise. Where did that come from? I was livid that Mildred had died and in this way.

Compassion is the blend of the identification of sympathy, entering into another person’s life situation, and righteous anger toward the external circumstances that have conspired to diminish a life.

This leads us back to my original question this morning, **“Where does the compassion of Christ in you intersect the brokenness of people’s lives?”**

Where do you find that you identify in sympathy with the hurts of others, but also where do you find yourself disturbed by the forces that destroy people’s lives? For some our pain in life becomes our invitation to service. Having gone through the pain of a divorce, you can be there for others experiencing the same thing. Having faced survived the fear of breast cancer, you find yourself coming alongside those who have just received the diagnosis. I say this because I know there is a vibrant informal network of support among breast cancer survivors in our congregation who come alongside those who are facing an uncertain future. Janet, another member of a church I previously served, told me that she was called to intervene with suicidal teenagers, because her sister had committed suicide as a teen. Our pain can become our ministry.

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We are a congregation that is being called by God to be increasingly faithful to the compassionate heart of Jesus for the local context in which we find ourselves. We desire to follow Jesus to those places where he weeps and is moving against the forces of evil that would corrupt lives.

This morning I want to make specific application to a segment of our congregation. I am speaking to those who are anticipating or have entered into their retirement years. This age group is probably important to me because I am a cutting edge Baby Boomer, and this year the first of the Baby Boomers are turning 60. The question is, what are we doing in service to the Kingdom of God in our community and wider world? It has been observed that the first half of our life is dominated by success in our chosen field. But then at halftime we shift to a search for significance. It is preparing for this second half that I am concerned about.

We have the potential here at Christ Church of unleashing an army of servant ministers both within the church and in particular to be a blessing in our local community, but only if our hearts are available to the flow of the compassion of Christ through us. The late Peter Drucker of management fame has observed that unfortunately retirees have not proven to be the fertile source of volunteer effort that was thought possible. One person wrote, **"Men don't die of old age, they die of retirement."** Why? Because in retirement we have not prepared to live or to serve. To the extent that retirement is viewed as the time to cut our engines, we lose our edge. If retirement is simply about lowering our golf handicap, leisure time and travel, then we have missed the fullest life possible. Drucker believes that if you do not have a second or parallel career in service by the age 45, and are not vigorously involved in it by 55, it won't happen. Service is a habit we must develop, not something that comes simply because we now have the time. If retirement is primarily viewed as the time to self-indulge, then we have missed one of the greatest opportunities for fulfillment. What is the outlet for you? Where does the compassion of Christ in you find expression in the brokenness of people's lives?

Howard Hendricks writes, **"Your career is what you are paid to do; your calling is what you are made to do."** Certainly our calling can be expressed in our careers, but it is not equal to them.

I live with someone who has learned to turn her retirement into a calling. I tell my wife that she should write a book on how to retire. Her career was in elementary education, the last 16 years as principal of three different schools. When we moved here from CA in 2002 she decided to retire, but not stop giving. She has taken the experience of her career and turned into service. She said that most of her career was spent in school districts of the privileged, and now she wants to give her expertise to those who need a hand-up not a hand out. Every

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Thursday morning you will find my wife in the Austin district of Chicago at a 5-8<sup>th</sup> grade Catholic middle school working with children who entered the program two grade levels behind. That is the entrance requirement. She tutors one on one in math and reading. But then most Thursdays she has lunch with the school principal offering her experience as they process areas of development in the school. This has led to opportunities to lead staff development around curriculum design and coaching of the teachers. She has found a mission beyond her career. Or as one person put it, **"I didn't retire, I redeployed."**

Many of you are already getting this. The food pantry in Westmont is one of the shining examples of a grass roots movement in our congregation. Many of you are walking alongside the hungry to offer not only physical assistance but are creating opportunities to be introduced to the life transforming power of Christ through biblical instruction. Thankfully, others of you are meaningfully engaged in service in varieties of ways that we may not see. I see this as only a beginning. In concert with the newly created Local Mission Team, I am announcing this morning the beginning of an emphasis we are tentatively calling *Kingdom Builders*, focused on mobilizing those in the 50 plus category for investment in the Kingdom of God. The best years of our lives are ahead. The purpose of this ministry is to help you discern, get in touch with and embrace the compassion that Jesus wants to grow in you and then be deployed where God wants you to serve. Right now *Kingdom Builders* is a glimmer of an idea. Tomorrow I trust, if it is from God, we can look back and see lives refocused and fulfilled, new ministries that have been birthed, and then story after story of lives that have been rescued.

Dallas Willard tells the story of the mechanical rabbit that dogs chase around the race track. One night the mechanism broke down and the dogs caught the rabbit. What do you think happened? It led to total confusion. The dogs just leapt around, yelping and biting each other, totally confused as to what was happening. That is a picture of the church and our lives when we chase rabbits that can be caught.

But if we set our sights based upon a calling that is found at the intersection of our life at the point of the compassion of Christ and human need, we then have a calling that can sustain us for a lifetime. It has been said, **"Service to others is the rent we pay for the room we have on earth."** I say, no, service to others is the response we give to the compassion of Christ poured out upon us and then through us.