



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: February 15, 2009

There is Room in the Container of Compassion

One of my fondest childhood memories is that of taking family vacations, which we did regularly. My parents would pack up the car and off we would go to a spot usually with some educational component. Our hotel stays were always part of the fun for my older sister and me. But one image I carry with me to this day is... upon entering the hotel room, my mother would always pull out her can of Lysol disinfectant and spray for what seemed like a very long time so that the remnant of those who had been there before us would be wiped clean!

It is interesting to me to see the rise in our country of products such as Purel and other anti-bacterial cleansers to try and keep us immune to life's dirtiness.

It's a metaphor for life too, isn't it? We can easily do the same thing in our emotional lives...we isolate ourselves from people or even whole groups of people who we feel may contaminate us with their emotional neediness, their pains and struggles, their messiness. It's all a very human thing to do...and...it's not new.

In our study on the Book of Job last week, Rev. Susan DeGeorge guided us through the reactions that Job's friends gave him as to why they thought he was suffering. And boy did he suffer. You know the story...Job lost everything...his family his wealth, his possessions and even his health.... Unfortunately, as I listened to the hardened responses from his so-called friends, once again...I was saddened at how the Church throughout its inception has used the same arguments...failing to be present to it's people in the most painful times of their lives... heaving on layers of judgment rather than compassion. Blaming people or explaining away situations as God's sense of justice as the reason for their suffering. As we discussed...they had no compassion for Job....and their responses were as antiseptic as my mother's can of Lysol.

Popular Catholic theologian Thomas Merton says, "Compassion is the keen awareness of the interdependence of all things." Wikipedia defines compassion as: *an emotion that is a sense of shared suffering, most often combined with a desire to alleviate or reduce the suffering of another; to show special kindness to those who suffer. Compassion essentially arises through empathy, and is often characterized through actions, wherein a person acting with compassion will seek to aid those they feel compassionate for.*

A lecturer once talked about a contest he was asked to judge. The purpose of the contest was to find the most caring child. The winner was a four-year-old whose next-door neighbor was an elderly gentleman whose wife had recently died. Upon seeing the man cry, the little boy went into the old gentleman's yard, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there. When his mother asked him what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said, "Nothing, I just helped him cry."

The passage that we read this morning from Mark is very interesting to me. It says, “A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him (Jesus), ‘If you choose, you can make me clean.’ Then it says...Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean.’”

First of all, leprosy was a disease of the skin and was a larger diagnosis for many smaller ailments that included a form of psoriasis. But in early Hebrew times it was connected with an idea of uncleanness. It was the role of the priest in the temple to declare that someone had it and was therefore unclean...and conversely when they were free of it and could therefore be restored to community life.

Leonard Sweet makes the point more boldly...”being branded as a leper was not just a diagnosis. It was a cultural death sentence....Those infected were forever forbidden to participate in normal social life....Those infected had to relinquish family ties...Those infected had to abandon all social relationships. ...Those infected had the human touch exorcised from their lives.

The enforced isolation required by Levitical law made a physical disease into a spiritual disease, both for those suffering from leprosy, and for those who imposed the law and turned away the lepers in their community. Those with leprosy had their spirit hollowed out by loneliness and isolation. Those who cast out the lepers had their spirit hardened and callused against compassion for another.”(Theologian Leonard Sweet)
The disease itself was not all that uncommon in those days, and there are several stories about Lepers and how others dealt with them both in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. We read two of them just now.

The most interesting part of this story to me is the word in verse 41...which is translated in our text as “pity”. (Jesus had pity on him)The word in the Greek actually means, “being very angry with him” Could it be, that Jesus...in a very human response near the beginning of his ministry was angry that this needy man wanted some of his time, and energy in the middle of his preaching and healing tour? Or, maybe Mark was using this story as a way to show that Jesus was reluctant to show his full power up against the priests, since they were the ones who could pronounce a person clean or not. Who knows, but the change in translation gives us a glimpse at how uncomfortable scholars are at seeing Jesus as anything but gracious and welcoming. Fortunately for that man and for us, Jesus recovers from his momentary lapse in compassion and heals the man...thus restoring his health and thus his status in the community.

The Interpreter’s Bible focuses on Jesus’ action saying, “It was the physical expression and accompaniment of the giving of his heart and mind and power in personal contact....Jesus violated a taboo (not isolating the man) which itself violated God’s compassion.” Truly, then, this becomes an example of the word becoming flesh and dwelling among us in full form...meeting someone where they were in body, mind and spirit and feeling with them... wanting to do whatever possible to help alleviate that person’s suffering.
That story reminds us we are each one part of the whole universe...and like it or not, we are all connected even if we don’t want to think so. But sometimes there is a disconnect for people in realizing that idea. In their book Compassion, theologians Donald McNeill, Douglas Morrison and one of my personal favorites, Henri Nouwen, say, that’s due to our own inner strength. “If we ourselves are unable to suffer, we cannot suffer with others. If we lack the strength to carry the burden of our own lives, we cannot accept the burden of our neighbors.”

“The compassionate life, they say, is the patient life.” Let’s break down that word compassion...(com)-(passion). Actually passion and patience both find their roots in the Latin word “pati” which means suffering. Thus, they conclude, the compassionate life is “a life lived patiently with others.” That’s hard to do if we are out of touch with our own pains and losses.

Compassion is, they continue, “the least understood virtue.” They seek to answer three questions in their book...one of which is...Is our guiding ideal a life of maximum pleasure and minimum pain? Their conclusion? NO. The authors place compassion at the heart of the Christian life in a world governed far too long by principles of power and destructive control. Compassion, they say, no longer merely an eraser of human mistakes, is a force of prayer and action...the expression of God’s love for us and our love for Him and one another.

So it’s not that we welcome suffering in our lives...our own or the suffering of another, but we don’t close ourselves off from it because we see that we are all one. We all share in community together. Feeling someone’s pain does not diminish us or them, but creates a more humane connection and more humane community.

Within each of us are the germs of our own form of “leprosy”, our weaknesses, our pet hatreds, our obsessions, our fears, our desires, our diagnoses. One way to find out what yours are, if you can’t think of any, is to consider what people or peoples you want to stay away from...or the people with whom you have the most trouble or judgment about...that may give you a clue. We may project onto others what we most fear or dislike in ourselves. And we can’t forgive others what we can’t forgive in ourselves. In a sense we have no room left in our personal container of compassion, because it’s all full of our own emotions and we can’t fit another thing into it...so we block it out and perhaps we judge it. *****

How can we have compassion for someone who has just been laid off, for example...when we are out of our minds in fear of that some thing happening to us? How can we sit and listen to someone who is depressed, if we have buried our own sadness and anger with an “everything is fine” for years...How can we watch stories about angry protesters on television if we don’t regularly visit our own anger at the powerlessness we have faced in our lives?

I found a wonderful article online by the Dali Lama giving a list of exercises to help develop compassion as a way of life. In one of the exercises he quotes from an article from Ode magazine. We are asked to reflect upon these statements when meeting friends or strangers. (Zenhabits.net)

Step 1: “Just like me, this person is seeking happiness in his/her life.”

Step 2: “Just like me, this person is trying to avoid suffering in his/her life.”

Step 3: “Just like me, this person has known sadness, loneliness and despair.”

Step 4: “Just like me, this person is seeking to fill his/her needs.”

Step 5: “Just like me, this person is learning about life.”

Even as I read those statements, I can feel my heart opening and resisting making a judgment about the person I may be meeting...which would have tended to put me in a superior stance and separated from that person, versus, in a state of compassion if they were expressing something that triggered me. In that same article, the Dalai Lama quotes another teacher as saying, “Compassion is the ultimate and most meaningful embodiment of emotional maturity. It is through compassion that a person achieves the highest peak and deepest reach in his or her search for self-fulfillment.”

And it’s what Jesus tried to model for us, isn’t it... Jesus calls us to another way...a deeper sense of love for ourselves, for each other and thus for a deeper sense of community.but it can be hard. In last week’s meditation session with Joel Beahr, we focused on compassion. First we spent time imaging the wish of well being and a freedom from suffering coming to us from those in our lives who love us unconditionally. Then we moved on to wish that for ourselves (we expanded our containers)...then we moved out and had that same wish of well being and freedom from suffering for those we love...then to acquaintances and finally to those for whom it is difficult for us to love.

It was essential to spend ample time in the receiving of compassion or else it would have been impossible to give it. We equal the playing field. The book, Journey into Love says, "Only when we see our self for who we really are and see the others as they really are, can we be whole and truly free."
There is room in God's container of compassion for you and for me....let us come together in prayer....