**Compassion**

(Reprinted from Inclusive Christianity: A Progressive Look at Faith)

We are taught early in life that our worth is dependent on success. Many of us frenetically strive the rest of our life to achieve. When I was a student, I didn't want to just do well on an exam. It had to be in "A". In sports, we don't want our team to just win. We want them to annihilate the opponent. This manifests itself in churches as perfect worship attendance. Churches give out pins for perfect Sunday School attendance. The problem with this is that God truly doesn't care about our competitiveness. God is not achievement oriented. God doesn't keep a scorecard. The essence of God is love and the manifestation of this is compassion. Compassion is more than just empathy, being attuned to another's feelings. It is more than sympathy, feeling sorrow for others. Yes, those are elements of compassion, but compassion includes the urge to act upon our empathetic and sympathetic impulses. As the "body of Christ", this means responding in action to the pain and suffering of those within our immediate community and beyond. We must elevate the powerless, sustain the impoverished, and allay the anxiety and fear of those who are vulnerable.

If we could use only one word to describe Jesus’ ministry, that word might be "compassionate". One of the earliest acts in Jesus' ministry was an act of compassion. Shortly after meeting James, John, Simon, and Andrew, Jesus enters the home of Simon's mother-in-law. She is in bed with a fever. Jesus sees this, goes over to her, takes her hand, and helps her up, curing her illness. Later, Jesus proclaims during the Sermon on the Mount :

"Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." (Luke 6: 20-21, Matthew 5: 3-4)

These were not just promises for the future. Jesus intended for his disciples to provide now for these vulnerable souls, and he expects us to do so today.

Later in his ministry Jesus heals a leper. Lepers, in the time of Jesus, were untouchable. Just imagine the first time you notice a skin lesion that doesn't heal. It can't be, not leprosy. But then another lesion appears. You try to hide the sores but soon there are too many to conceal. As the truth sinks in, so does despair. You kiss your wife goodbye for the last time and weep as your children disappear in the distance, for you are being led beyond the town limits. Forever ostracized, you will no longer be welcome at synagogue or town meetings. You will never again experience the warmth of an embrace. You will now be dependent upon the charity of others. Then you hear rumors, rumors of a man who can heal, rumors of a man who has performed miracles. Is it possible? Is it too good to be true? Excitement builds as you hear that he is coming to your town. There he is, walking toward the gates. Hurry! You've got to get to him before he enters the town. Running over you drop to your knees and beg, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Then he does the unthinkable. Without consideration for himself, he reaches down and touches you, the first touch you have felt in months. "I am willing," he says. "Be clean!" (Luke 5: 12-13). And immediately the leprosy leaves you.

Maybe you are a woman from the town of Nain. It is a sad day, a day of despair. Your only son is dead, cut down in the prime of his life. It's not supposed to happen this way. We're not supposed to outlive our children. Now you will be destitute, dependent on the mercy of others, for there is no work for a widow in Judea. The funeral proceeds from the town and you try to hold it together, but the weeping will not subside. Then a stranger appears. The story continues in the seventh chapter of Luke: "When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. (Luke 7: 13-15). Jesus didn't know you, never heard your name. But he saw your pain, felt your pain, and was moved to relieve your pain.

These are just a few stories demonstrating Jesus' compassion. He reached out to the lame and blind, a hemorrhaging woman, and thousands of others, healing their ailments. He joined Mary and Martha has they wept for the death of their brother Lazarus. He joined in their tears and then reacted to relieve their suffering. He even healed the ear of the soldier who arrested him. Jesus hung out with thieving tax collectors, adulterers, prostitutes, and "half breed" Samaritans with sullied reputations. He purposely sought out people with baggage. Jesus specifically tells us that he came to help people such as this, not the righteous. If he returned today, I have no doubt that he would not appear in my church in Huntington Valley, Pennsylvania. I would find him in an impoverished section of Philadelphia or a bar, putting his arm around an alcoholic. Jesus was not a man to sit in his comfort zone. He could have. He was trained as a carpenter and could have made a living, free from the “undesirable” elements within his society. But Jesus was attuned to God’s will and it demanded that he bring God's message of compassion into the world.

The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus imitated God: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; He can do only what he sees the Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does." Yes, God chose purposely to come into this world so that God might experience the sorrows and suffering of humanity. God chose to reside in a baby born in a stable, the son of an unwed teenager. Jesus didn't have to endure the wilderness for 40 days, but that is what he chose. Jesus was rejected by his own hometown and thought to be insane by his family. He was perennially homeless, and ultimately abandoned by his followers. He was mercilessly beaten, lashed, and ultimately crucified. Jesus didn't have to submit to that pain and suffering but was willing to do so as the cost of bringing God’s realm into the world. It was the nature of his love, the nature of his compassion.

As disciples living "in Christ", we share God's compassion for others. As the Apostle Paul says we "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). As a start we become attuned to the signals emanating from people. This requires us to be less self-centered and more other-centered. It requires us to work on our interpersonal and observational skills. We look for slumped shoulders in a previously confident person. We notice when the animated person becomes quiet, the joyful becomes irritable, the gregarious becomes isolated. We call the person who has stopped attending church. We seek the lost souls. Philip Yancey tells a story at the beginning of his book, "What's so Amazing About Grace". A man comes upon a poor, homeless, sick prostitute. Not only had she prostituted herself, but she also had prostituted her daughter. Not knowing what to say, the man finally asked her if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. The woman turned to him and cried, "Church! Why would I ever go there? I'm already feeling terrible about myself. They'll just make me feel worse." I think many people who have lost their way in the world feel the same. Too often the church has not been an agent of grace. It has been a means of judgment and punishment. I have seen alleged Christians spew slogans of hatred. If we are to live the Gospel message at all, we must learn how to be agents of mercy and forgiveness for that is the degree of compassion shown to us by God. Dorothy Day, the Christian activist, once said, "I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least." Who do you love the least? That might be where God expects your compassion.

What does compassion look like? Once you have identified somebody in need or hurting, what can you actually do? What can you actually say? Sometimes it is obvious. You can directly help the poor by providing food, clothing, household items, education, and job training. If your church does not have a mechanism for this, there are plenty of volunteer organizations that work with the poor. Grand gestures are not necessary. Little acts of kindness will do just fine. Just as the mustard seed grows into a tremendous bush, just as a pinch of yeast leavens in entire loaf, a small act of compassion can have a profound impact. This is something that my friend Gwyn learned through our church's prayer shawl ministry. Many women at Gloria Dei Church knit prayer shawls, prayerfully meditating over each stitch. One day, Gwyn's friend Janet called. Her father, Bob, who had been sick for quite awhile was now to be admitted for bypass surgery. Janet needed extra emotional support so Gwyn went with her to the hospital. On her way over to Janet's house, Gwyn recalled the prayer shawl ministry, so she decided to stop by the church on the outside chance that a shawl was available. After a brief search, a shawl was located and Gwyn was on her way. She felt a little silly giving a shawl to a man but did so anyway, informing him that someone knit the shawl with great care and hope that it would be placed into the hands of someone in need and remind them of God's love. Gwyn was quite taken aback by how touched Bob was at receiving this gift. He underwent his surgery but did not do well. There were postoperative complications and every day became a struggle. For every small move forward, there was a setback. Bob struggled valiantly and each step of the way he clutched onto his prayer shawl. The hospital staff also began to cherish Bob's shawl. He explained to them how a complete stranger knit the shawl just so that he would know that people cared. Finally, Bob made enough progress to be transferred to a rehabilitation facility. Janet was reassured enough to go on vacation with her family, a vacation that had been planned long in advance. She asked Gwyn if she would visit her father while he was in the rehabilitation facility. Even at the rehabilitation facility, Bob's prayer shawl was revered. After his bed was made, the staff neatly folded the shawl and placed it back on his pillow. When he went for physical therapy, it was placed across his lap. Later in the week, Gwyn received a call. Bob had taken a turn for the worse. Gwyn sat with him in the emergency room most of the day until he was readmitted to the hospital. The next day, Gwyn really didn't feel like visiting Bob. After all, she had been at the hospital most of the previous day and was exhausted. But something inside her urged her to go. Recalling that day, Gwyn feels certain it was God's spirit urging her onward. Shortly after arriving at Bob's room, it became apparent that he was deteriorating and would die. All Gwyn could do was sit by his bedside and stroke his hand, making him aware that he was not alone. As he clutched his prayer shawl, she heard his last few breaths. Leaning down she whispered, "It's okay Bob, God loves you." Visiting a friend's father and giving him a prayer shawl may not seem like much, but the impact on Bob was remarkable. It led him into God's presence in his final days. Bob died secure in the knowledge that people around him cared, that he was part of a larger community, God's family.

Compassion becomes trickier when we are talking about people who are sick with chronic conditions such as cancer, pain, or neurological disabilities. It can also be difficult to know what to say or do for people experiencing life-altering struggles such as a job layoff, divorce, or the loss of a loved one. Often there is not much that you can say or do. Just being available to them is the best thing that you can do. The pain of loneliness is the worst pain of all. Just being with people temporarily distracts them from focusing on their pain and helps them feel less alone. Hug them, cry with them, or just sit with them. Just being there reaffirms that they are still a part of humanity, something more than their pain. As best as you can, provide reassurance, reestablish confidence and hope, and help them restore their competency. People with chronic disability lose their sense of dignity and self-esteem as they lose control of their body. Given the option of doing something for them versus helping them to do it on their own, we should choose the latter. People who suffer need to maintain constancy in their life, which otherwise feels broken. When we are with them, we should try to maintain the same type of relationship as was present before their suffering. If you told jokes, then tell jokes. If you watched soap operas, then continue to watch soap operas. If your relationship involved good-natured bickering, then do that. Sometimes the best thing that you can do is introduce them to a person who has had a similar experience, someone who has already traveled down their path and come out the other side, or at least found peace in the journey.

Many suffering people feel that God has abandoned them. Our presence can reassure them that God is present with them in their suffering and that they are never alone. As Christians we can pray with them and encourage them to share their emotions with God. They can be angry and yell at God, or cry with God, but it is up to us to remind them that either way God is present. God’s love can drive out their fear and give them peace. Praying will help them divert their attention from the physical and redirect it to the spiritual. When words are difficult to find, you can express God's caring through Psalms:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures,

He leads me beside quiet waters,

He restores my soul.

He guides me in paths of righteousness

for His name's sake.

Even though I walk

through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and love will follow me

all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord

forever.

There have been many times when I have depended on this 23rd Psalm for strength.

Sometimes we can help by debunking misperceptions. Suffering people often feel that they must have committed a terrible sin and are being punished by God. The God we see in the New Testament through Jesus is not a punitive God but rather "The Father of compassion and the God of all comfort."(2 Corinthians 1:3). People need to hear that message. God often transforms evil into good and sometimes we can help people find meaning in their suffering. I developed a chronic pain problem several years ago. This has forced me to seek God in a more significant way than I had previously. As a strong-willed, independent man, it has taught me how to receive help from others. As a physician, it has made me more empathetic to my patients and their pain. It has created a tolerance within me for the minor difficulties of life. It has enabled me to discover what is really valuable in life. Sometimes meaning is found in the impact that it has on others. It can bring estranged families together and mobilize a congregation or community to act compassionately.

The Christian Church can become the conscience of compassion within every community. Most churches do a pretty good job of visiting homebound congregants and those who are hospitalized. But every church can also strive to develop support groups for various chronic illnesses, such as cancer. Grief counseling can be available. Stephen Ministries can be established. A Stephen Ministry is designed specifically to intervene with congregants when they struggle through difficulties. There are training programs throughout the country where a church can send members to develop these skills. Churches can support 12 step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. The adult education curriculum can include topics that deal with illness, crisis, and grief. Affluent churches need to establish relationships with impoverished churches. In large churches, small group ministry is essential. It is only within the context of a small group that people are able to feel safe in opening up and trusting others. One can find an honest, empathetic response within a small discipleship group.

Too many times we offer excuses for a lack of compassion. "But I'm not good at doing that sort of thing." "I would go, but I can't stand the smell of hospitals." "I never know what to say in those kind of situations." "I find sick people depressing." I'm sure happy that Jesus wasn't into making excuses. We have a program at our church to help people identify their gifts . The purpose is to match people's gifts with their passion, which then enables them to effectively embark on ministry. This has identified people with a gift for lay ministry and pastoral care. But it is not enough. Each and every member of a church needs to remember the compassion of Jesus and strive towards reflecting that compassion. His compassion required a special type of love, sacrificial love. Because Jesus was willing to go to the cross for us, it follows that we will pick up our cross and enter into other people's suffering. Henri Nouwen puts it this way in his book Compassion:

Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.

This is no less than what God did for us. Jesus instructs us, "Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate" (Luke 6:36). It was more than his wish. It was his command.