
Compassionate God, Compassionless World

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
Proper 10 – Year C

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion.

About 8 years ago, I took the youth of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Albany, Georgia on a mission trip to Navajoland. Our purpose for going was to put on the Vacation Bible School for Good Shepherd Mission in Fort Defiance, Arizona. But, we also went to learn about the Navajo Nation. In many ways, we went to seek an answer to the question: Who is my neighbor?

What an experience it was. We learned about the history of the Native Americans. We hiked on the reservation and saw some great monuments. We learned about the Navajo culture and values, their struggles throughout history, and we even got a couple of opportunities to feast on traditional Navajo cooking.

And perhaps my favorite part was the way in which the people of Good Shepherd Mission celebrated their Sunday Eucharist. It was powerful to see what happens when you cross Anglican worship with Navajo spirituality.

It was an amazing week, but it was also a week with 20 teenagers: shared bathrooms, teenage drama, and many nights sleeping on the floor. I will be the first to say that I was beyond excited to load up the van and head home to Albany, Georgia.

So, imagine how I felt when our van blew a tire somewhere between Navajoland and the Albuquerque airport. There we were, in the middle of nowhere, with no cell phone signal and no one to call. Thankfully, about the time I started to panic, a Good Samaritan appeared.

He likely saw two vans parked on the side of the road, with 20 teenagers looking frustrated, and a priest thumbing through an owner's manual trying to locate the car jack and spare tire. This Good Samaritan looked upon our group and had compassion.

A few weeks later our youth preached about the Mission Trip during the Sunday Eucharist. I was still a new priest, meaning I didn't know to read their sermons before they stepped into the pulpit. There was nothing wrong with what the youth had to say, but every single sermon said the same thing. Every sermon was about the Good Samaritan who offered us compassion.

Good Samaritans have a way of impacting our lives. I believe that everyone in this Cathedral could step into this pulpit and preach about a Good Samaritan who offered compassion and impacted your life. You could get up here and share those stories because it is likely that experience of compassion was so profound it was a defining moment in your spiritual life.

We might even say that experience of compassion was in reality an encounter with God. You see, when we experience compassion we encounter God. And we know this because the scriptures speak of God's compassion and mercy.

At least three times in the Psalms (86:15, 103:8, 145:8) we hear the phrase: "God is full of compassion and mercy, slow to

anger and of great kindness.” God is full of compassion and mercy and we see that fundamentally in the person of Jesus Christ, who extends compassion throughout his ministry.

We all know the words to John 3:16, but do you know the words to John 3:17? John writes: “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” God does not condemn; God shows compassion.

In today’s parable, Luke describes the Good Samaritan as having “compassion.” There is a Greek word that Luke uses for compassion, and every time he uses it in his gospel it is in reference to God. And that’s important, because Luke wants us to see that Jesus is the Good Samaritan.

Jesus will heal wounds that are broken. Jesus will touch people that others choose to walk on by. And, Jesus will comfort those who need to be comforted, because God is full of compassion and mercy.

But here is the tension. Here is the tension we all are experiencing right now. *In scripture we encounter a compassionate God, but we live in a compassionless world.*

If you followed the news this week, you know we are a society in desperate need of compassion.

When it comes to the deaths of Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, and the Dallas police officers, I struggle to find words today. Actually, I have typed and deleted words for about three days now. And anything I say this morning will likely be a recapitulation of what you have read in the papers, heard from politicians, seen on the news, or been bombarded with on social media.

So I will say this. John begins his gospel in this way, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

John continues, “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ... But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.”

Children of God. Nothing has moved me more this week than the voice of one of the children of God. In the back seat of Philando Castile’s car was a 4-year-old girl. When the shock of all that happened hit her mother, the little child yelled, “Mommy, mommy, it’s okay; I am here with you.”

That was the voice of compassion in a compassionless world.

The prophet Isaiah writes, “a little child shall lead them” (Isaiah 11:6), and undoubtedly the words from that child provide insight on what is needed most in today’s world.

It is doubtful that we will move the needle of progress forward until we practice compassion. And practicing compassion starts with walking across the street, sitting down with the person we view as the other and speaking the words, “It’s okay; I am here with you.”

A few years ago, when I was priest in charge at St. James’, Marietta, I took the entire staff to the Georgia Dome to hear a series of speakers on leadership. One of those speakers was former Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

Mayor Giuliani’s focus was on the importance of compassion in leadership. It was a great talk with a catchy one-line phrase that has stuck with me for years: “Weddings optional and funerals mandatory.”

Giuliani’s point is that people are moved by compassion. If you want to be an effective leader, if you want to change society, or the culture or an organization, then you must start by practicing compassion. Compassion changes people’s lives.

Our call as Christians is to follow the example of Christ, to follow the example of the Good Samaritan, to go and do likewise, as Jesus commands.

Practicing compassion begins by crossing the street and saying to the other, “I am here with you.”

Let us pray:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. *Amen.*

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