

Sermon Series: Connecting With God

Week 2: Reconnecting With Compassion

Luke 10:25-37 Colossians 3:12-16 Rev. Todd B. Freeman
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa July 5, 2015

During this past week there have been countless reactions and responses to the Supreme Court's ruling that extended the right to marry to all persons in this country, regardless of sexual orientation. Perhaps you noticed the Religion section in yesterday's *Tulsa World*, or on today's front page, that included responses from several religious leaders here in Tulsa. I give credit to *World Religion Writer*, Bill Sherman, for including such a wide spectrum of viewpoints – from the far right to the far left.

Religious liberty in this country thankfully guarantees the right of every American to their own beliefs. Most likely, however, you recognized **a distinct lack of compassion in many of those responses to marriage equality.**

Earlier this week, Marilyn Hill drew my attention to a blog entitled, "Stuff That Needs To Be Said," by **John Pavlovitz**. Concerning the marriage equality issue, he reflected on the particular responses by so many who identify themselves as Christians. In a July 1 post entitled, "**6 Ways Christians Lost This Week**," he writes:

So many professed followers of Jesus spent the last week on the attack, desperately fighting a battle long after it had already been decided. Instead of simply looking for ways to personally affirm our faith in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision, too many of us frankly just lost it. We spit out vitriol and we cursed strangers and we treated others with contempt. Our response to the LGBT community and those who support them wasn't compassion and decency and peacemaking, it was sour grapes, damnation, and middle finger.

Here are the 6 ways Pavlovitz claims Christians lost this past week.

1. We lost the chance to be loving.
2. We lost the chance to be good neighbors.
3. We lost the chance to be good Samaritans.
4. We lost the opportunity to show how big God is.
5. We lost the chance to reflect Christ.
6. We lost people.

He concludes, "This stuff should simply break our collective hearts. All of us who claim Christ need to do some honest, invasive personal reflection. Regardless of our feelings about the Supreme Court's decision, it's clear that Christians lost far more valuable things than a 5 to 4 vote this week; things that we better fight like Hell to get back." (I love when I quote other people so I can say things that I wouldn't normally say.)

In making reference to the familiar parable known the Good Samaritan, today's Gospel reading, we see that it is indeed a reflection of and instructive to our response to those who are hurting. And I would add, those who have been oppressed. Interestingly, it's now many on the far right who are feeling hurt and oppressed. But the response of far too many Christians this past week was to not recognize those who have been hurt, nor to move toward them with gentleness and mercy, seeking ways to help bind their wounds – many of which they caused. It's true, many walked passed those who were down, some kicking them hard on the way by. In other words, there was a lack of compassion. **I continue to wonder when holding true to one's convictions crosses the line into spiritual arrogance.**

The word *compassion* literally means, "to suffer with," or "being with suffering." The very opposite of compassion, then, indicates either an inability to recognize the suffering of others, or to see it and not care, or to care but then not do anything to help alleviate the suffering. The **Good Samaritan**, we learn, did all three. **His compassion gave him the courage to see, the courage to feel, and the courage to act. When we reconnect with our ability to be compassionate, we are connecting with God. That's a crucial element of our spiritual growth.**

In monitoring the responses on both sides of the marriage equality issue, for example, I have noticed that it is not only certain evangelicals and conservative traditionalists who are not responding with compassion, like a good neighbor. A lack of empathy and compassion, even to the point of condemnation by some, seems to have been the go-to response by many on both sides of this debate.

Jesus has not made this easy for any of us. Perhaps the point of this parable is to show that we all have a problem showing compassion – suffering with – those with whom we disagree. It's an old problem that each and every one of us has when we pick and choose those who we think deserve our compassion. Here's Jesus' response: In order to be a good neighbor we must extend and demonstrate mercy and compassion to anyone and everyone. I don't know about you, but it makes me uncomfortable when Jesus has us look in the mirror. For when we're honest with ourselves we don't always like what's staring back at us in the face.

John Philip Newell, in his book that I'm using as a guide to this sermon series on connecting with God, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, states: **"Compassion is about making the connection between the heart of my being and the heart of yours, and following that connection."** Admittedly, there are some people with whom many of us would just as soon not make a connection. Genuine compassion, however, would have us reconsider that stance.

Perhaps you've heard of **Aung San Suu Kyi** (b. 1945). She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her work in leading a nonviolent movement for democracy in Burma, which is now called Myanmar, located in Southeast Asia. Referred to by some as Burma's Gandhi, she spent most of 1989 thru 2010 under house arrest.

Suu Kyi wrote a book in 2008 entitled, *"The Voice of Hope."* She describes the movement for change that she is leading as a "revolution of the spirit." She follows a threefold path of compassion that is directly related to her Buddhist inheritance and practice. I alluded to it earlier in this sermon. **She describes compassion this way, "The courage to see. The courage to feel. And the courage to act."** As we have seen, this describes the Good Samaritan to a tee. Newell writes, "To live compassionately, she says, is to courageously see the connection between ourselves and those who suffer."

We are called, therefore, to foster and nurture a way of seeing that recognizes the Sacred Presence of the Divine in others, and in all of creation for that matter.

Suu Kyi writes in her 1995 book, *Freedom From Fear*, "To live the full life one must have the courage to bear the responsibility of the needs of others – one must *want* to bear this responsibility." **Unfortunately, many have become accustomed to seeing compassion as a duty, almost a burden. However, *wanting* to bear responsibility for the needs of others can be a blessing in that it can free us from a narrow self-interest. This is what differentiated the Good Samaritan from those who passed by on the other side. It was not a matter of hatred, it was a matter of self-interest. Perhaps that helps explain many of the reactions and responses to marriage equality – not hatred, but preservation of self-interest.** Newell writes:

The great challenge is to see our connection with those who seem different from us – the nation that does not share our vision, the people whose lifestyle we cannot understand, the individuals or groups who threaten us. Part of Suu Kyi's stature of spirit is her refusal to demonize those who have wronged her.

This past week has served as a sad reminder that those on both sides of the social and theological spectrum can fall into the trap of demonizing those with whom we disagree, especially those who have indeed wronged us. This is why we are called to be compassionate.

When we realize that we are not only made *by* God but made *of* God (Julian of Norwich) we can understand that compassion is at the heart of our being, "waiting to flow again for one another and for those who suffer. Part of the rebirthing of God in our lives and our world is allowing these depths [of compassion] to flow."

The ability to see and feel compassion for others, however, isn't the end point. Rather, that's what needed to lead us to the next step: to show and translate compassion into action. Yet as we saw in the parable of the Good Samaritan, compassionate action can be **costly**. Granted, the complexity of needs in the world can overwhelm us into inaction. But we need to start somewhere, perhaps simply by doing what we believe is the next right thing to do. Our responsibility then, is to do what we can, to have the courage to see, the courage to feel, the courage to act.

Newell concludes his chapter on connecting with God in and through a reconnection with compassion this way:

Each one of us has a critical role to play in our families, our personal relationships, our religious communities. No one else can play that role of compassion for us. Do we know this, that each one of us is essential?

That's our challenge for this week. A couple of weeks ago I encouraged you to find ways to reconnect with the sacredness of the earth. Continue to do that. This week, I also encourage you to find ways to reconnect with compassion. With the grace of God, we can do it!

Amen

Resources:

John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2014.