

The Compassionate Christ
Mark 1:40-45

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My mother and father-in-law were country music singers before there was country music. With guitar in hand and harmony in their heart, they traveled the hills of Owen County singing at revivals and Sunday dinners on the grounds. One of my favorites was a little ditty that went like this:

Your roses may have thorns, but don't forget,
Your thorns may have some roses too.
The Lord of great compassion loves you yet,
And He will never fail to see you through.

It is the Lord of great compassion that I would like us to consider today. To have compassion is to suffer with another, with a desire to help. It is to feel with your heart and the will to act upon these feelings. In our story today, Jesus is filled with compassion. Let's take a look.

THE NEED FOR COMPASSION

As Jesus travels the hills of Galilee preaching the kingdom of God, a leper comes to him on his knees begging, *"If you are willing, you can make me clean!"* We do not have to go searching for need, need comes to us. Of all diseases of the first century, leprosy seemed to be the worst. With leprosy, your skin turns to ulcerated sores, your joints ache, your fingers and toes rot off.

The physical pain is nothing compared to the social isolation. Leviticus 13:45-46 says, *"A person with leprosy must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' when anyone approaches him. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp."* It is awful to suffer. It's even worse to suffer alone.

Persistent suffering is an ongoing problem in our world. Every month one hundred sixty-five thousand people die of malaria, one hundred forty thousand die of diarrhea, preventable deaths if medical help were available. Every hour three hundred fifty-four people die of AIDS; that's one person every ten seconds, three million people a year. The AIDS pandemic is the greatest humanitarian challenge the world has ever faced. Suffering is more than numbers and statistics. People suffer. Mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, and worst of all little children suffer.

Hurting people look for care and compassion. *"If you are willing, you can make me clean."* Rebecca O'Conner is a nurse at New York Presbyterian Hospital. When she saw the horrific images of the Asian tsunami, she knew she had to do something so she flew to Sri Lanka with eight other medical professionals. They set up a makeshift clinic in a downtown Sri Lankan mosque, treating hundreds of people a day with respiratory problems and foot and leg wounds. Then they discovered there was a hospital less than a mile away. So the obvious question

was asked, "Why are people coming to us when there is another large hospital clinic so close?" A Sri Lankan friend was quick to answer, "At the hospital someone asks your name, age, complaint and then you are given a sheet of paper and told to wait somewhere. Here you sit down with the person, listen to their story and try to treat what you can." There is an old proverb that is right, "People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care."

THE GIFT OF COMPASSION

In verse 41 we read, "*Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man saying 'I am willing. Be Clean.'*"

Jesus cares—

When people suffer all alone, Jesus cares.

When hearts are broken and losses are great, Jesus cares.

When life is confusing and we are disturbed, Jesus cares.

His heart is touched with our grief. When the days are dreary and the long nights weary, Jesus cares for you and me. God is greater than your aching heart.

In an age when churches are tempted to be mini-corporations and pastors try to be CEOs, we might need to reconsider in what condition our compassion might be.

Sue Monk Kidd tells the story of visiting a nursing home with a youth group as a twelve-year-old kid. "I didn't want to go," writes Sue. "My friends were enjoying their last day of summer vacation at the swimming pool and I wanted to be with them, but my mother had the last word." Smarting from my forced visit I handed this ancient looking woman with a twisted face a bouquet of crepe paper flowers. Looking deep into my eyes she said, "You didn't want to come, did you child?" Sue protested, "Oh, yes, I wanted to come and see you." But the old lady smiled and said, "It's O.K., you can never force the heart."

Jesus said in Luke 6:36, "*Be compassionate as your father is compassionate.*" Compassion is more than political slogans and passionate sermons. Compassion is justice and mercy for all. Compassion is the keen awareness of the interdependence of all things. Compassion is the willingness to act on the need at hand. Compassion is the conviction to do what you can with what you've got. Compassion is a decision to touch the untouchable, love the unlovable, and help the helpless in the hour of need.

Emily Dickinson put it this way:

"If I can stop one heart from breaking,

I shall not live in vain;

If I can ease one life from aching,

Or cool one pain,

Or help one fainting robin

Into his nest again,

I shall not live in vain."

THE CONSEQUENCES OF COMPASSION

Here our story takes a strange twist. In verses 43-45 it says, *“Jesus sent him away with a strong warning, ‘See that you don’t tell this to anyone.’ ... Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news.”*

What’s happening here? Is a leper smacking the hand of the one who healed him? Is he so starved for attention that he cannot resist the temptation to become the talk of the town? Maybe some news is just too good to keep. How could a healed man hide it? The very site of him in the marketplace would be a testimony to the miracle.

So Stuart Hamblin says,

“It is no secret, what God can do,
What He’s done for others, He’ll do for you.
With arms wide open, He’ll pardon you.
It is no secret, what God can do.”

Desmond Tutu says, “If you are going to be compassionate, be prepared for action.” Compassion creates a problem for Jesus. ...“He can no longer go in and out of town freely. So he stays outside in the lonely places” (Verse 45).

Jesus has no desire to be a superstar. He isn’t looking for coverage on the evening news. He doesn’t want to announce His healing powers across the globe, so He retreats to the “lonely places” to restore His soul.

With all the disasters striking our world over the last year, people are beginning to talk about “compassion fatigue.” Is it just too much? Now that the world is a global community where the picture of a starving child in Ethiopia is conveniently streamed into our living rooms, and pleas for help are portrayed in our television screens before they are communicated to neighborhood rescue squads, what are normal people to do?

Keep your heart tender and your prayers current. In the desert, Abbas and Ammas expressed their compassion for a hurting world by retreating to the desert to pray. Could that be a lesson for us? When we have done all we can do, let us trust God to do the rest.

So, you who are hurting, and you are weary trying to help the hurting — Come to Jesus.

You who are tired from carrying heavy loads — Come to Jesus.

He’ll meet you wherever you are — Come to Jesus.

Amen.

