



“Compassion and Courage”
Scripture – Matthew 9:35-10:1, 5-23
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, June 18, 2017

Today’s passage begins with a summary of what Jesus has been up to since his baptism and temptation in the wilderness. Matthew writes, “Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, 1) teaching in their synagogues, 2) proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and 3) curing every disease and every sickness.” The next verse explains what motivated his actions. Was it divine command? No. Was it moral obligation? No.

Then, what compelled Jesus to teach, preach, and heal? One of the greatest motivators of human behavior – Compassion. Matthew says: “When (Jesus) saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

The crowds were comprised of widows and orphans, tax collectors and sinners, the lame and the lepers. There were blind men reduced to begging and women who had been passed around from one man to another. The crowds were mainly the poor and the abused, and unlike the religious leaders of his day, Jesus felt compassion for these people. Their pain and their sense of helplessness seeped into his heart.

Author and poet, John O’Donohue, reminds us that “The heart is where the beauty of the human spirit comes alive. Without the heart, we would be sinister. To be able to feel is the great gift. When you feel for someone, you become united with that person in an intimate way; your concern and compassion come alive, drawing some of the other person’s world and spirit into yours. Feeling is the secret bridge that penetrates solitude and isolation. Without the ability to feel, friendship and love could never be born...This makes the human heart the true jewel of the world.”¹

Seeing people in pain filled Jesus’ heart with compassion. He responded with words that were like a healing balm massaged into their wounds. He told them they were God’s children, he lifted their spirits, and he healed them in body, mind, and soul.

However, there were multitudes in need, so he recruited 12 interns to expand his ministry. Jesus commissioned his disciples to carry out the same work they had seen him perform and he dispatched them with their marching orders.

I suspect they discovered that caring for the needs of others simply for the sake of obeying a command can easily lead to resentment. Whether it is feeding people who are homeless, caring for an aging parent, or mentoring a child, if you are doing it simply out of a sense of duty, you will grow to resent the person for the demands placed

on you, and eventually it will lead to fatigue and burnout. However, authentic compassion for another prompts a generous spirit, sparks a desire to serve, and produces a deep sense of satisfaction.

It is important to note that the work Jesus commissioned them to perform was far from easy. He called on them to “Proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near and to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons.”

On that last point, might he have been referring to the demons with which all of us are well acquainted? These are the demons that go by the names of anger, strife, lust, deception, greed, selfishness, and arrogance.

And it may have been these demons rumbling in people’s souls that made the work not only challenging, but dangerous. Jesus sent them with this warning: “I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

To carry out the ministry of Jesus, his followers would need to be compassionate, but they would also need to be courageous. Not everyone would embrace their teaching and preaching. Some would respond with hostility.

To be a faithful follower of Jesus requires more than compassion. It also requires us to stand steadfast in the face of contrary winds.

Of course, this was not only the mission of the twelve. It is the mission of the church. I am confident we have the compassion, but can we muster the courage?

Author Derek Bell points out that “Nobody is born courageous, nobody has courage all the time; and nobody who has not yet been courageous lacks the possibility of choosing it in the future. Courage is a decision you make to act in a way that works through your own fear for the greater good. Courage means putting at risk your immediate self-interest for what you believe is right.”²

As I pondered what it means for followers of Jesus to cast out demons in 21st Century North America, my thoughts kept reverting back to the divisiveness that is poisoning our politic and carving up our communities. Disagreement with the ideas of another too often turns into dislike and distrust of the person. Many act as if anyone who disagrees with them must be either ignorant or mean-spirited and they feel justified in simply writing them off. Many have the demon of anger simmering millimeters beneath the surface. Most keep it in check, but there seems to be an increasing number of people who are losing control of their dark side. When they explode, it runs the gamut from an ugly shouting match with a neighbor, to lashing out with deadly force.

What does it mean to cast out demons today? Some would say that those on the other side of the political divide are the demons themselves and must be vanquished. People who don’t see things my way are ignorant or naïve, selfish or corrupt. Most ridicule the other side and distance themselves, shutting down all lines of communication.

Today’s passage could actually encourage this way of thinking. Jesus says, “If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. They will be judged worse than Sodom and Gomorrah.” That is, if someone will not listen to you, walk away and display a sign of judgment on them. Put negatively, if someone will not listen to you, write them off as irredeemable. Put positively, walk away and do not resort to hostile actions.

I suspect that is the stance of most people in our nation these days. They believe that those on the other side are a bunch of fools and want nothing to do with them.

However, in the past year, we have seen an increase in the level of hostility. Political extremism is on the rise and with it, more documented cases of bullying and intimidation. Some street demonstrations have turned violent.

Worse, in the past three weeks we have seen what happens when demons dominate and fury spirals completely out of control. A white supremacist in Portland harassed Muslim teenage girls on a train and then stabbed to death two men who intervened. In Washington State, a man driving a pick-up truck and shouting racial slurs ran over two Native American men, killing one of them. In Alexandria, a man opened fire at a baseball practice once he confirmed they were Republicans.

Followers of Jesus must question the demonization of those who think differently. Could it be that we are called to model civil conversation with those with whom we disagree? Could it be that we are to exhibit a bit less hubris and a bit more humility? Could it be that we are to help people focus more on the issues than character assassination? Surely God expects us to focus more on compassion than winning, healing than destroying, and the common good than personal advantage.

We cannot wilt in the face of injustice. Racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, and xenophobia are immoral. Hate-filled rhetoric and intimidation are wicked. God wants us to muster the courage to confront evil. However, the manner in which we do it matters.

Standing for what is right is noble. Destroying another human being is pernicious. We must have the courage to shine light in dark places. But in order to shine light, we must be compassionate. It is crucial to note that Jesus did not send out his disciples until they had witnessed him performing numerous acts of compassion, heard his warning of how anger can spiral out of control, and had been commanded to love their enemies.

How prepared are you to confront injustice and to shine light in the dark places you encounter?

Grace Lindvall is a twentysomething Presbyterian preacher's kid. Last month she and her boyfriend were shopping in a clothing store in Charlotte, North Carolina where they live. Her father says "They were poking around the racks of clothes when they noticed an awkward conversation unfolding between the store clerk and a customer who was wearing the traditional head turban marking him as a member of the Sikh faith. The clerk was refusing to serve the man. Loud enough for all to hear, he said, "We don't have anything you would want here."

"Grace and her boyfriend observed this act of obvious hostility and discrimination and got involved. They asked the clerk if he was refusing service to the man because of his religion. The clerk declared that the guy was a member of one of those 'terrorist religions.' This got the couple's dander up. They whipped out their phones and began filming the incident. They also proceeded to tell the clerk about the unfairness of his generalizations – refusing service to somebody wearing a symbol of his faith. They added for the clerk's edification that Sikhs are not Muslims and there have also been Christian terrorists [who, in the name of Christ, have bombed Planned Parenthood clinics and murdered doctors who perform abortions]. The twentysomethings were not going to let the clerk get away with it unchallenged." [Their compassion for an innocent human being gave them a transfusion of courage].

Then, "just as emotions peaked, several people – one of them with a large television camera perched on his shoulder – emerged from the rear of the store. They explained to the young couple that the encounter was being filmed for an ABC television show called, 'What Would You Do?' ... (a show that) secretly films people in public situations as actors posing as real people present them with a moral dilemma – a choice that invites them to do something...or do nothing. One show had a nanny yelling at the child in her care, calling the child 'stupid.' You're just walking by. What would you do? Another show had an atheist seated in a restaurant. He watches a Christian family say grace before their meal and begins to berate them about religion. You're at the next table. What would you do?"³

In our current climate, there is a good chance that you will encounter a hostile or unjust action. What will you do?

To fulfill the mission Jesus has given us, we need an ample supply of both compassion and courage.

May you have what your moment demands.

NOTES

1. John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space between Us*, (New York: Doubleday, 2008), p.101.
2. Derek Bell, *Ethical Ambition: Living a Life of Meaning and Worth*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2001).
3. Michael Lindvall, "What Would You Do?" May 14, 2017.