

July 14th, 2019- Fruits of Spirit Sermon Series: Compassion

Today we are continuing our look at the Fruits of the Spirit as shared with us by Paul in his letter to the Galatians. As you may remember from last Sunday, Paul's list is quite exhaustive and, in an attempt to make it more palatable to all of us I narrowed his list down into five fruits of the Spirit, which I felt encompassed all that Paul had intended to highlight. Those five being Humility (which we looked at last Sunday), Compassion (which is today), Patience, gentle strength and kindness. These fruits of the Spirit are, as Paul suggests the ways in which people of faith should live. That we should live with humility, compassion, patience, gentle strength and kindness; but my question is, how do these fruits of the Spirit actually make a difference in our lives, and how does our faith in Jesus Christ and God inform those ways of living?

If you were not worshipping with us last Sunday you missed your chance to sing Oh Lord its hard to be humble by Mac Davis in church, but there are many folks here today that would gladly share with you the YouTube link to the song as I received about six text messages this week from congregation members saying that they could not get that song out of the heads and so wanted to return the favour by sending me the link

Unfortunately, there isn't a jovial song about compassion that we can sing together today, so instead I thought we could start by looking at the definition of the word compassion and some of the ways that we see it used in our everyday lives. At its root compassion is an action word, but it seems much the same as I suggested our understanding of humility was, that it has been corrupted for ease of use. According to the dictionary compassion is defined in two parts it is a, "sympathetic consciousness of another's distress together with a desire to alleviate it." That is what differentiates compassion from Empathy. Empathy refers to the ability that we have to relate to another's persons pain, discomfort, stress or suffering, whereas compassion is not only relating to it, but includes the desire to somehow mitigate that pain, discomfort, stress and suffering.

But it is also within this want to mitigate that we have corrupted what that action means. One of the most prominent ways that we often see compassion being evoked in our society is when you find yourself watching late night TV and see an advertisement for World Vision or The World Wildlife Foundation. In those infomercials they often showcase for you the horrible circumstance that people and animals are facing, and in doing so they elicit that sympathetic consciousness, but they don't want you to stop there, they don't want you to just have empathy, they want the act of helping, however the help is specific, the help they want is

not your hands, but your money. And so, they then start to say, “With only a \$1 a day, the price of a cup of coffee, you can make a difference in the life of _____.”

That then, has become our best effort when it come to compassion, because we are moved by a sympathetic consciousness, we then act by throwing money at the situation.

Now by no means am I suggesting that that is bad, because we do the same thing every Sunday in this church. Our minute for missions follows the same pattern. We are given a situation, told about the hardship (thus eliciting our sympathetic consciousness) and then are told how the Mission and Service Fund is supporting that situation, and how we can help, not by volunteering, by giving our money, (thus responding, acting).

The problem I have though, and the reason I would like to suggest to you all that our understanding of compassion, much like humility, has been corrupted; is that we have reached appoin in our current age, when volunteerism is at an all time low, but giving's to a number of different organizations and charities is steadily increasing. Even with our own Mission and Service Fund, which I support and think is a good program, but the problem I have is that its too easy and I don't believe that when we speak of compassion as fruit of the Spirit, that the intent,

biblically speaking, is for us to throw our money at situations, to make a list of all the people we can help; the intent I believe, is to act with our own hands. Now I say that with some trepidation, because I don't want to preach a sermon suggesting that you all stop giving to whatever charities you support, but I think we also need to understand that at its heart the fruit of the Spirit described as compassions, is a faithful act; not just the faith of giving money and then moving on

This, I believe, is highlighted for us today with the incredibly familiar parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable is so well known, that now, religious or otherwise, we use the term to refer to anyone that does something nice for another person. The funny thing about familiar passages however, is that we often remember them, the way we want to, rather than for what they actually say. In today's reading a lawyer approaches Jesus and asks some questions. There is a great debate about the lawyer's intent; was this lawyer actually trying to trap Jesus somehow, or make him look like a fool, or was he genuinely interested in what this young man, who has garnered so much attention was saying.

What we know for sure is that this lawyer would have been part of the upper echelon of society, that tells us nothing about who he was or his intent, it

simply tells us that he was man of a high position. And he asks Jesus a question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus, as he often did, responds by asking a question of his own, “What is written in the law?” The lawyer of course, being a student of law, responds, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength, and with all your mind and your neighbour as yourself.” “Wonderful,” Jesus says, “You have given the right answer, do this, and you will live.” Story over we would think, but the lawyer has a follow up question, “And who is my neighbour?”

What follows is the parable, a man walking alone on the road to Jericho, is robbed, beaten, stripped of everything he owns and left for dead on the side of the road. Jesus then explains that three people walk by, the first is a priest. Nowadays we would assume that the priest would stop, in fact we would assume that the priest should stop and help, but biblically it was not surprising to those listeners that the priest crosses the road and carries on. There were regulations that the priest needed to follow to remain ritually clean in his work in the temple, he likely was a busy man pressed for time and as such he could not physically help the man; he likely had empathy for him, but he could not act other than to pray and maybe to send help once he arrived at his destination. The Levite is the same, not at the same stature as the priest, but his vocation within the temple required

him to hold up the laws of the Torah, and he too was a busy man, which meant that he too could have empathy, but could not physically act to help.

The surprising twist of course is who does help. Stephen Patterson, in his book *The God of Jesus: The Historical Jesus and the Search for Meaning*, suggests that it was a common practise in the time of this account, that when a teaching moral story those telling it would often be a Priest, Levite and an Israelite. The understanding then was that the priest and the Levite were not expected to act, but that the Israelite would. But Jesus changes the narrative, instead of an Israelite, which the crowd was expecting, because for sure one of their own would help this beaten and broken man, Jesus says a Samaritan comes along. And what does the Samaritan do? Well he is very hands on. He has compassion, he sees and sympathizes with the man broken on the side of the road, but he also acts. The text says he was moved with pity. He places his hands on the man, treats his wounds and bandages him. He lifts him onto his animal and takes him to an inn to be cared for. He pays for all the expense and even offers to pay more if it was needed.

Jesus then asks which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man? The lawyer of course offers the same answer we would have, it's the one

who had compassion, who was moved so much by this suffering that he acted, that is the one who acted as a neighbour and Jesus says go and do likewise. Great story, but the problem is Jesus never actually answered the lawyer's question. The lawyer asked who is my neighbour? Jesus doesn't give an answer for that, instead he challenges the listeners to not determine who our neighbour is, but instead to focus on who is being the neighbour. It's a slight difference, but its an important difference.

You see the lawyer, along with all the people listening that day knew, that the law required them to love God and to love their neighbour. The Lawyer wants Jesus to make a list that he can write down and check off, all of those that he is suppose to see as his neighbour, so that he is guaranteed eternal life, much the same as we make our lists of the people we have help and the tax receipts we should receive; but Jesus doesn't give him that list, he doesn't make a faithful life about checking a list, its not that easy, instead what Jesus says is go and be the neighbour. Compassion then, according to this parable of Jesus, is about seeing the need in others and responding, helping with our hands and our other resources. This shouldn't surprise you, but what I hear in this passage is that true compassion is about being in relationship with those around us in our community and beyond. Compassion is not just about throwing money at a situation, its

about entering into it seeking to help in whatever way is beneficial in that moment.

By today's standards, our normal standards, compassion no longer has much to do with relationship, it simply means doing what makes us feel better. I see a need, I want to respond so I place the money in the pot and feeling better I move on, often immediately forgetting about the need that I saw which moved me to begin with. Compassion, though described by Jesus in this text, and described by others in other texts, is relational. The life of faith is relational, the fruits of the Spirit calls us into relationship with others. The act of compassion informs us in our lives to be and to work together in community, to live for one another and thus, as Jesus would say, live in the Kingdom now.

A couple years ago I witnessed compassion first hand. I was on Whyte Ave (Downtown Edmonton) having a cup of coffee with a friend in the Starbucks. Across the street was a young man, was sitting on the curb with an empty cup which said, "Spare change for coffee" . People saw the man and put money into the cup, which was a kind and gracious thing to do, but one elderly lady did something different. Seeing the young man and his cup, she walked past him into the coffee shop and bought a coffee, and then returned to the young man gave

him the coffee and then, and this was amazing, sat with him for close to half an hour. From my vantage point it seemed as if she just listened to him, she shared a relational experience with him. Realistically she didn't give more money, then anyone else did; but what she gave was herself, her time, her level of commitment; she built a relationship. She acted as the neighbour, as Jesus expressed in his parable.

What changed for that young man, was his whole demeanor. For most of the night he sat hunched over, but the moment this woman began talking to him he came alive, he was animated, he cried with her and laughed with her and moment she left he put the cup away, he didn't jump up and move on. Instead he stayed on the curb and said hello and greeted every person that walked by. He even shared some of the money he had collected with other people. That was compassion, taking the time to only notice, and helping, but taking the time to engage and build relationship. That is what Jesus says it is to be a good neighbour and it should inform all of our lives; for our faithful response to every occurrence in life, is to find the time and to build relationship with others. May it be so today and always. Amen.