

Compassion for the Helpless

Standing around after church one Sunday a man told this story: "I was sitting in my car outside the grocery store, waiting for my wife to finish shopping, when I saw the strangest thing. I noticed a poorly dressed young woman pushing an old shopping cart, filled with plastic bags of what looked like empty bottles and cans, and old newspapers. A small child sat among the plastic bags, and another child about 3 years old walked alongside her.

Coming from the opposite direction I saw someone I knew, a smartly dressed young man. As he passed her, he turned around suddenly, and called out something to get her attention. I couldn't hear what he said. When she turned, he bent over and pretended to be picking up what looked like money. He went up to her and said that she had dropped the money. He quickly put it in the child's lap and was gone.

It was less than a month later, when I saw the same young man again. He was standing in line at a checkout in a Supermarket. He was standing behind a person who obviously found it hard to make ends meet. The person was counting out small change to pay for her milk and bread. I saw the man bend down and he came up holding a twenty in his hand, and as he stood up he insisted that she had dropped it. She said it wasn't hers but he insisted."

The man telling the story finished by saying, "When you see someone do something like this, it makes me feel that there are still people in the world who really care. The trouble is that I never liked this guy until now."

When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Harassed and helpless. Look around at your world. There is no shortage of harassed and helpless people. You may know some people who would describe themselves as harassed and helpless. At different times, you may have described yourself as harassed and helpless. It's all part of life in a beautiful yet broken world.

No one knew that better than Jesus. After all, He had created the world with His Father and the Holy Spirit. He knew how things were supposed to be. To make things right, He left the glory of His Father's side to be born in a dark stable to a virgin mother. And there the friction and controversy and danger starts. Now here, as a man, He stands looking at the crowds of people that He's come to rescue. Each person in the crowd has their own problems and misfortunes. Others have lived lives that seemed right to them but now they're at a dead end. Some have been mistreated through no fault of their own, some have complicated their lives by making bad choices. And what is Jesus' reaction? It tells you everything you need to know about Him. He had compassion for them.

The word "compassion" is very meaningful. In the original Greek it indicates a feeling that starts in your gut, brought on by the trouble you see someone else having. It's what we mean when we use phrases like "stomach-churning," or something terrible happens and you say "my heart goes out to that person." There is a visceral, physical reaction you have when you see people with deep needs. Jesus was often overcome with compassion to the point of exhaustion. But compassion was never just a feeling that Jesus felt. His compassion always led to action. In the story that I just told, a young man was moved to take action and give to those in need. Jesus' compassion moves him to take action as well, in two ways that I want to talk about this morning.

In this passage from Matthew, the way Jesus takes immediate action is a bit unexpected. He asks for prayer. He says, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." As usual, Jesus is using memorable, metaphoric language to get his point across. And his point is to pray for people who will go out looking for other people to bring into the kingdom of God. It's a wonderful picture and one we don't think about nearly enough. The harvest is plentiful, Jesus says. There's no shortage of people waiting to receive the gifts of Jesus. Pray that faithful people will go out and get them.

Looking at this passage in order to share it with you, I was stunned. And I'll tell you why. Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, so in his compassion, what does he do? He asks for help! Jesus asks for help! He asks his disciples to pray! And see, this is where it gets very real and very personal. If you do that; if you pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest, something is going to happen, I guarantee it. Your prayers are

going to start out as “Lord, please send workers into the harvest.” But the more you pray that, the more you will start to think, “maybe I could be one of those workers.” Maybe I could be sent out into the harvest. You start thinking those thoughts. If you’ve had those inklings, don’t ignore them. You are being called and sent. Just imagine, you could be an answer to Jesus’ prayer.

There’s another way that Jesus’ compassion moved him to action. In Romans 5, it says that God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Jesus’ whole life was moving toward the cross; He was driven there by compassion for you and me. It was compassion that caused Him to sweat drops of blood, to cry and pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. Compassion caused Him to be slapped around by guards and treated like a circus sideshow by rulers. Compassion caused him to be punished like a criminal, his body and his heart broken, insulted even while hanging on the cross. He let it happen. You know why, don’t you? Because Jesus knew it was either Him or you.

Once upon a time a bee stung a man on the cheek. Then it chased his daughter around the room. The little girl was terrorized, until the father said, “It’s OK, sweetie, the bee left its stinger in me. It can’t hurt you now.”

The gigantic stinger of eternal death was plunged into Jesus on the cross, and he let it happen, because of his compassion for you.

Let that sink in, and watch what it does to your heart.