

“Growing in Compassion”
Psalm 103:6-14/Matthew 9:35-38

For the past two weeks, my sermons have focused on God’s call to grow. One might reasonably contend that every homily has growth as a concurrent theme, but in these weeks leading up to Commitment Sunday, we have been explicit about that divine intention as part of the Flourish initiative; namely that no matter what our age we are to keep maturing in the life of faith. Thus, we began with a reminder of God’s desire for us to grow in offering and accepting grace. We pondered last Sunday how our Maker wants us to grow in knowledge, in particular as it relates to the activity of God in our lives. Today, we focus on how we have been made to grow in compassion. To set the stage, let me share research about how some fall short in that arena.

One of the most transforming changes in life during the past decade has been the rise in the use of social media. The blessing of that technology is the immediacy of letting others see what is occurring in our lives; that’s also its challenge, of course, as once an image or comment is posted online, it cannot be taken back. Months ago, I learned of a study that concludes social media over-sharing does not always result in compassion for others who do the same thing.

“Just about everyone,” the article begins, “has sent an ill-advised tweet or posted an overly revealing Instagram picture. You’d think that would make us more forgiving of such transgressions by others. Not so, according to a not-yet-published study by a professor at Carnegie Mellon University...[It] surveyed hundreds of people about the personal stuff they’d posted online. A few weeks later, they recruited about a third of the original group for what was ostensibly a separate study. The participants evaluated a hypothetical job candidate who was perfectly qualified, but who had shared drunken photos of herself online. People who had admitted posting intoxicated party pics of themselves in the first survey were much less likely to hire a job candidate who had made the same mistake. One possible explanation might be what a researcher calls “moral dissonance.” When we see someone else doing something we regret doing ourselves, “we punish others for our own sins.” (“Oversharers are the Most Judgmental About Oversharers,” *Pacific Standard*, November/December 2013, p. 17) In contrast to that curious human response, our two Biblical texts offers a model of divine compassion.

The Old Testament reading includes words familiar to many. “The LORD is merciful and gracious,” David proclaimed “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...As far as is the east is from the west, so far [God] removes our transgressions from us.” Those words are often part of worship when we are reminded of our forgiveness. In the next verse, that shepherd king adds, “As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.” Thus, David contends it is God’s intimate knowledge of us--the frail and flawed people we are—that results in divine compassion when we stumble and when we face challenges not of our own doing, too.

Our New Testament reading offered a similar understanding in describing the compassion of God’s son. It came when Matthew summarized how Jesus had been teaching and healing, moving from one village to the next. In the midst of that report, the gospel writer says this about Jesus: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” For Matthew, too, it was Jesus’ understanding of human existence that led to a compassionate response.

In the case of Jesus’ reaction, though, Matthew describes it in a stronger way that is apparent in English. The Greek word he used by the gospel writer can be translated as “had compassion,” but literally it means to have one’s bowels feel sympathy for another. In that era,

human emotions were often spoken of as emanating from the abdomen. That isn't our usual anatomical descriptor for emotions as our culture tends to speak of the heart in that way, talking, for instance, of individuals who are heartsick or cold-hearted, heartless or broken-hearted.

Still, we do use language in ways that first century citizens would have understood for when a person reacts without thinking they can say, "It was gut instinct." When a child strongly dislikes someone he might say, "I hate his guts" and when we get shocking news, persons can describe it as "a punch to the gut." Matthew speaks of Jesus' compassion in that way; a personal connection that led him to respond. Our best acts of compassion share that same trait.

Some of you may remember the news report from years ago about thirteen fifth graders in a San Diego suburb who shaved their head. It wasn't some fashion trend, but instead a show of support for their classmate Ian O'Gorman who had been diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma. After surgery, Ian underwent eight weeks of chemotherapy and decided that before his hair began to fall out that he would have it shaved. Thirteen of his friends at Lake Elementary School in Oceanside, CA chose to shave their heads, too, so that Ian wouldn't feel out of place. The boy's teacher shaved his head and dubbed that group of boys as the "little bald eagles." For eight months the children went to the barber every two weeks to keep their scalps clean.

One day, Ian's doctors called to tell him that the lymphoma was in remission. He got the news at a time when five of his friends were at his house playing. Upon getting that wonderful message, the group broke into a rap song they had been composing for the occasion: "We're the bald eagles and we're here to say we get to grow our hair back today." Another friend said upon hearing the news later, "We were like jumping up and down for joy!"

That's the kind of compassion that God seeks in you and me, too. The word itself comes from two Latin words that literally mean to "suffer with" and I believe it is the word "with" that helps us grow in that way. David said that God's compassion resulted from the fact that God had been with us from the beginning. Matthew said that Jesus' compassion derived from a physical connection he shared with all of humankind. We, too, grow in compassion when we recognize we have much more in common with each other than is different from the other. And while there do seem to be some people who are born with a fully developed compassion gene and thus have to learn times to set boundaries to avoid compassion fatigue, for most of us, it must be taught.

Scott Dannemiller, a Presbyterian writer and father of two young children posted a blog a couple of years ago called "The Two Most Important Things to Teach our Kids." Dannemiller and his wife Gabby spent a year as volunteers in mission for our denomination in Central America. Upon their return to the states he resumed his career as a corporate trainer, but has continued to be intentional about bringing the insights of that time of mission to bear upon everyday faith. One of the ways he articulates that ongoing struggle with a larger audience is through a blog called "The Accidental Missionary."

In one posting, he offers all kinds of anecdotal and research support to argue that the first thing we need to teach children is courage to face adversity on their own. He goes on to lament times when that kind of parental encouragement gets out of whack, in particular as it relates to youth sports, and then cites some studies from a Harvard-based group called *Making Caring Common*. Their mission is to help "educators, parents, and communities raise children who are caring, responsible to their communities, and committed to justice." Dannemiller then shares what he believes is the second, yet more important thing that our children need to learn.

"But all the courage in the world," he says "won't give you strong relationships and a servant's heart. It takes compassion... Compassion starts with sympathy—the ability to understand a person's circumstances. And this sympathy grows into empathy—the ability to

truly feel what another person is feeling...And compassion? Compassion is empathy with action. Compassion is how relationships are built and maintained...Compassion is about paying attention to the quiet voices of those on the margins. Hearing them. Feeling them. And then acting as though the interests of others are just as important as your own. Even when society and the scoreboard tell you something different.” (Dannemiller, Scott “The Two Most Important Things to Teach Our Kids.” www.theaccidentalmissionary.net, May 13, 2015)

There it is again, the conviction that compassion accompanies an understanding of “with-ness.” To be sure, teaching compassion is not just a task for parents nor is it a lesson that needs only to be absorbed by children. One doesn’t have to look beyond the headlines of our day to realize that compassion is needed in all places of the globe and it grows when we recognize what we hold in common with each other. Certainly there will always be differences—differences of experience and opportunity, talents and resources, circumstance and perspectives. That kind of diversity is also part of God’s creative design. Yet instead of allowing those differences to divide us, we are called to grow in offering compassion. It begins with recognizing what we share.

Given the exciting World Series that wrapped up on Wednesday, I want to conclude this morning with a baseball story. Twelve years ago, a statue was unveiled in front of a Brooklyn minor league park, recalling two major leaguers from an era long before—Jackie Robinson and Pee Wee Reese of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Both players died years before the statue was erected, but their families were present for the first glimpse of a monument recalling a moment from 1947. As many of you know, Robinson was the first African-American to play major league baseball. Reese was a white man who had grown-up in the segregated South, was an All-Star and captain of the Dodgers. From the start, Robinson received death threats and taunts from the crowd in ballparks on the road. One day the team was in Cincinnati and the catcalls began during batting practice until Reese walked over on the field and offered a quiet but significant gesture. The statue shows the men with Reese’s arm around Robinson’s shoulder. There is no photograph of the actual moment and thus isn’t clear if Reese put his hand on Robinson’s shoulder or around him or just moved up close. In any case, the hecklers ceased.

At the statue’s dedication in 2005, Rachel Robinson said of her husband “I remember him talking about Pee Wee’s gesture the day it happened. It came as such a relief to [Jackie] that a teammate and the captain of the team would go out of his way in such a public fashion to express friendship.” Dottie Reese added, “For [Pee Wee] it was a simple gesture of friendship. He had no idea that it would become so significant. He would be absolutely amazed.” In 1997, two years before he died, Reese concurred in his wife’s assessment when he tried to explain to a reporter why he had done it. “Something in my gut reacted at the moment,” Reese explained. “Something about what? The unfairness of it? The injustice of it? I don’t know.” (Berkow, Ira. Two Men Who Did the Right Thing,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 2005).

We know. It’s called “compassion.” May we continue to grow in sharing it, too.