

IMAGINE A WORLD WITH MORE COMPASSION

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch

September 11, 2022

TEXT: Luke 6:36, Colossians 3:12-17

KEY SENTENCE FOR FACEBOOK: Just as Jesus has had compassion on us, we are called to be compassionate, and make a difference in the world.

Today, is the National Day of Service and Remembrance – as we recognize the 21st anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Centers in New York City – September 11, 2001. On this day – we remember the stories of that fateful day when almost three thousand people lost their lives, in Pennsylvania with a downed airplane, at the Pentagon with an attack there – and in New York City when the twin towers were attacked and collapsed. But today is also a day to remember sacrifice and service – and to commit to reaching out and caring for our neighbors.

One story of amazing outreach and compassion comes from Gander, Newfoundland – located on Canada's eastern most province along the Atlantic Ocean. Gander is a very small town of about 9,600 people. It is an average small town – with a community center, 4 city parks, a museum, and a mall. And an international airport, sitting at the most easterly part of North America. During World War II, this airport was an important refueling stop for transatlantic flights.

Well, on September 11, 2001, out of the great urgency of safety, all of North America's airspace was closed by Transport Canada and the United States Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Gander Air Traffic Control rerouted some 200 flights to various small airports in Eastern Canada – and 38 civilian jumbo jets, bound for the United States were ordered to land at the Gander airport! On board those planes were around 7,000 passengers and crew members – that came from all over the world, including: from Israel to the Philippines, England to Ukraine, Africa to Russia and from almost every state in the USA. And all these passengers and flight crew were forced to stay in the Gander area for up to six days until the airspace was reopened! Imagine what that must have been like for a small town like Gander to almost double in size - with people from all over the world.

Well, the Gander community really pulled through. As the passengers stepped off the airplanes, exhausted, hungry and distraught, after being held on board for nearly 24 hours while security checked all of the baggage, they were greeted with a feast prepared by the townspeople. And then, bus drivers volunteered to bring people to makeshift shelters at schools, restaurants donated food, families cooked, and pharmacies supplied hygiene products. Every school, gym, community center, church, and camp, was to be used to settle people in. A middle school provided showers, as well as access to computers, email, and televisions, allowing the passengers to stay in touch with family and follow the news. “Over the course of those four days, many of the passengers developed friendships with Gander residents that they expect to last a lifetime....

Interestingly there has been a book called “The Day the World Came to Town” (Jim DeFede) written about what happened at Gander that day – and there is even a musical called

“Come From Aways” about those events. Both recall the inspiring stories of these residents of Gander whose acts of compassion and kindness that made a big difference, touching the lives of thousands of people.¹

And so, today, on this Day of Remembrance and Service, we remember and give thanks for people like those in Gander – who showed such kindness and goodwill to complete strangers who literally landed on their doorsteps, unexpectedly. And we are thus encouraged to find ways we can serve our neighbors – and show compassion.

Imagine – imagine what our world would look like – if there was more compassion, like that. Not just during a time of crisis, like 9/11 – or on one special Day of Service. What would happen, if we all, were filled with more compassion – as part of our *everyday* life-style – focusing on ways we can share that love with our neighbors God has given us.

All throughout Scripture, we hear about God being compassionate. For example, Psalm 145:8 says – *“⁸The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. ⁹The LORD is good to all; He has compassion on all He has made.”* God’s heart is full of compassion, and He wants us to have compassion for others.

But how would you define compassion? The Greek word “compassion”, as it is used in the Bible, means “to be moved inwardly - literally in your “gut”. The Greek world believed that your intestinal area – the gut - was the seat of emotions. It is where we get the expression – “I had a gut feeling.” Compassion is thus a word that describes something that moves us deep within. Someone has defined compassion as “sympathy coupled with a desire to help.” We have empathy – and share the feelings of others and then possess a desire to help them in their trouble. We see suffering and pain and we are moved to respond with kindness and mercy.

That’s what Jesus did – time and time again; He saw people in need and was moved with compassion. When Jesus saw the blind men, for example, he *“had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him”* (Matthew 20:34). When He saw groups longing for his teaching, *“He had compassion on them and healed their sick”* (Matthew 14:14). Christ saw the confusion of the people in the crowd following Him, and *“had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd”* (Mark 6:34). Jesus’ heart was filled with love for His people – and He acted to help them in their need. And that is exactly what Jesus wants us to do as we follow Him.

It has been said that, *“You are never more like your Heavenly Father than when you are giving mercy and compassion.”* Think about that, “You are never more like your heavenly Father than when you are giving out mercy and compassion.” Our whole desire in life should be to be like Jesus – to walk in His footsteps. So how can we be like Him in showing compassion? What can we do to show love to our neighbor?

Our Scripture, for today is the well-known Parable of the Good Samaritan. Many of us grew up hearing that story and some can even tell the story by heart. But I want us to look at it again, with fresh new eyes – and see how it can apply to our own lives. Listen and ask yourself, “Where do I fit in this story?” “How am I a neighbor to others?” “Do I show compassion?”

In response to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” – Jesus replied with this story:

“A Jewish man was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road.

³¹ “By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. ³² A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side. ³³ “Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. ³⁴ Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins,^[c] telling him, ‘Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I’ll pay you the next time I’m here.’ ³⁶ “Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?” Jesus asked. ³⁷ The man replied, “The one who showed him compassion.” Then Jesus said, “Yes, now go and do the same.”

As we listened to the story of the Good Samaritan, who are the bad guys in this story? The robbers are for sure, aren’t they – the ones who beat the man and left him to die alongside the road. But are there other “bad guys”? Could it be that it was the 2 religious leaders? Those who walked by on the other side and didn’t show compassion? Why didn’t they show compassion? What were their excuses?

The first one to come along the road was a priest, the most holy of all Jews. He walked on by and didn’t show compassion. Why? Well, by law, he couldn’t defile himself by coming in contact with a dead person. Even though the man wasn’t dead yet, my guess is the priest didn’t want to get his robe dirty or take the risk of getting attacked himself. The suffering man just wasn’t worth it – and he just didn’t want to get involved. Hm-m! Have you ever felt like that?

The second one to come along was a Levite – or a Temple Assistant. He’s kind of like an altar boy – someone who helped the priests. Look was this man does. He goes over and looks at the poor man, lying there on the road – and then turns away and does nothing. He really doesn’t have an excuse for not showing compassion. Rather, he is just apathetic. He doesn’t seem to care. He sees the man – but through eyes that were blind to the need – or maybe eyes that were more self-focused than other-focused.

What is interesting is that these two men were two really good Jews – who seemed to think that this injured man was unworthy of their time and effort. We can shake our heads and point out how bad they were – but could it be that we do the same thing from time to time? We deem a person or a group of people not worthy of our time, our money or our efforts...because we end up judging or ignoring, rather than loving and showing compassion.

True compassion is not based on worth – but is based on need. And it is based on giving love and care, like God has reached out to give us love and compassion.

Now, notice what the despised Samaritan does. First, in verse 33, it says, “he saw him”. You will notice that the priest and the Levite who had walked the road that day, also “saw” the

man --- but there was a difference, wasn't there? Have you ever heard the expression, "he looked right past me" or "He looked right through me"? Those people didn't see with eyes of compassion or mercy. Perhaps they saw with eyes of fear or eyes of disgust – or maybe just lack of concern.

And oh, how easy that is to do that ourselves. How many times do we see pictures of children who are dying or examples of extreme poverty and just ignore it or maybe not even be moved by it? Or what about the busy, hectic lives we lead? We can become so caught up in our own dreams and goals – that we only take notice of those who "fit" into our plans. If they don't fit, then we don't take notice of them and we don't think they are important in our lives. But God says everyone is important. Everyone is precious in His eyes. Learning to see others as God sees them is the first step in becoming more compassionate. Beyond what this Good Samaritan saw, it also says he allowed his heart to be moved with a feeling of compassion. He took the time to try and feel what that man was feeling. What would it be like to be walking along a road and be attacked and beaten and left for dead? What would it be like to lie there, yearning for someone to come and help, and yet see people walk by on the other side and ignore you? If you stop and think about how that would feel, hopefully, you would be moved with compassion and would want to do something to help.

But all too often, we aren't moved with compassion, are we? We become hard or bitter because of all the pain we have experienced in our own lives. We end up being so focused on ourselves that we don't see the other and for sure don't think about what they might be going through. Or we just become desensitized and numb hearing the news, over and over again – we end up just ignoring the need and closing our hearts. But we are called to keep our hearts open and pliable, filled with the Holy Spirit and ready to give that same kind of unconditional love to others that He gave to us. God calls us to "come alongside" our neighbors and feel what they are feeling.

To be compassionate, we need to truly see people in need – seeing them as God sees them. And then we need to feel compassion – to allow our hearts to be moved when we "get inside their skin" and feel what they are feeling.

And finally, we need to respond. It is not enough just to see and to feel, we also need to take action. The Good Samaritan really got involved. He went out of his way, in fact. Not only did he bandage his wounds, he also took him to a hotel. And not only did he take him to a hotel, he paid for his night's stay. And then – he even came back the next day and paid the innkeeper whatever else he owed. We would say "he went above and beyond the call of duty". But Jesus would say that is your call of duty. That is what I want you to do. Be compassionate – be a neighbor to people in need – show my love to people everywhere.

Where do you see this kind of compassion around you today? I see it in our church when they reach out to help people in need – through our Blessing Box Ministry. And I see it in people reaching out to someone who needs a helping hand, a listening ear and an encouraging word ... and even a ride to church. I see it when faithful and compassionate adults reach out to children and youth in ministry, sharing the love of God. And I see it on our "Be the Church

Sundays” where we go out together as a church family to do various outreach activities in the community, outside the walls of the church building.

I have a vision that we as a church can grow wider and reach out more to show compassion to our neighbors. And there are so many ways we can do that together as a church family. In your bulletin today, you received a sheet that was developed by our Outreach Chairperson, Kim Barton, showing many opportunities for mission and service. Listed are places where you can really help people in need and make a difference in their lives – like the Fish Food Pantry or the Diaper Bank.

On the back are just a variety of ways you can volunteer to help around the church – putting action to your faith – getting involved and helping others.

At the Pastor’s Roundtable, some of the dreams of those participating were to have more times to “Be the Church” and go out to minister to others. And it was stated that it really helps us grow closer as a church family when we work on projects together to help others. For example – I remember years ago when we did something called “Miracle Days” which were short, one day mission trips around the region. One Saturday, we went together as a group to Chicago and helped work on the building of an inner-city church – and we even did some painting at the Rescue Mission here in town for a local mission trip. Those mission trips brought us together – and blessed us in our service. Could we do that again? Could we find ways to do mission trips and share compassion with others? What about working together to do things like Habitat for Humanity or Fish Food Pantry?

Can you imagine – what would our church look like if we worked together to bring more compassion into our world? Who could we show God’s love and mercy and make a difference in their lives?

Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, once prayed, “Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God.” May that be the prayer of our hearts! May God stir a divine compassion into the heart of our church – so that we may care for others, change lives and be compassionate just like Jesus.

PRAYER

INVITATION

Today – give the Spirit permission to care for others, to change lives, to be compassionate like Jesus. God’s compassions never fails. God is love – that is who He is. Jesus is drawing you to Him – today are you ready to surrender your heart to the Lord Jesus Christ

Pray – heavenly Father I surrender

I believe that Jesus died

Forgive me of my sins

Thank you for your grace, your love

RESOURCES

¹Different articles I read about Gander, Newfoundland:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gander,_Newfoundland_and_Labrador Marcia Wendorf,
“*Operation Yellow Ribbon: A Tiny Canadian Town's Remarkable Response to 9/11*”.

<https://interestingengineering.com/culture/operation-yellow-ribbon-a-tiny-canadian-town-s-remarkable-response-to-9-11>
<https://historybyday.com/human-stories/the-911-story-you-probably-never-heard-of-how-the-town-of-gander-saved-6700-people/>