

Courageous Compassion
May 10, 2015
Ephesians 4:32 (NIV)

This morning's Scripture reading is a single verse. It offers wise counsel for living well that is both incredible simple and exceedingly difficult.

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. God of compassion, help us to become a people of compassion. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Last week I shared several ways people approach spirituality. I concluded by suggesting that a spirituality of practice is the most common in our country among mature adults. As I greeted folks at the door I heard many friendly remarks and one unexpected question: What exactly do you want us to practice?

As you may expect, my initial answer was something like "practice following the Way of Jesus." I recognize, however, that such a life task is about as big and broad as imaginable and it lacks an obvious place to begin or to renew one's commitment. This morning, I have a better answer: an ideal starting point for doing, performing, or living out one's faith is compassion.

Marcus Borg, a progressive Christian scholar who has shaped my thinking about what it means to live as a follower of the Way of Jesus, taught that "compassion is the central virtue of a life centered in God as known in Jesus."¹ Further, he suggests that although Luke 6:36 is typically translated "be merciful as God is merciful," a better translation given the meaning we assign to words in our contemporary culture would be "be compassionate as God is compassionate."

We know compassion when we see it, and if we open our eyes we realize it is all around us. Earlier in the week I crowd sourced a list of

¹ Marcus Borg. "What is a Christian?" <<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/marcusborg/2013/11/what-is-a-christian/>>

compassionate people. That diverse list included well-known people like Pope Francis and Jimmy Carter alongside those that lack name recognition like a close friend and a grandmother. It also included the Boston Marathon bombing victims and their families who are pleading to spare the bomber from facing the death penalty.²

Perhaps an attempt to define compassion is warranted. The always thoughtful and typically thought provoking Presbyterian minister and prolific author Frederick Buechner suggests

“Compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it's like to live inside somebody else's skin. It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too.”³

How might we practice this virtue? For those among us for whom feelings and emotions are private or underdeveloped, what simple steps might we follow? Could compassion really be as easy as 1-2-3?

John Philip Newell, the author of the new book *The Rebirthing of God* that inspired this sermon series, believes it can. He proposes that compassion calls us to move from the courage to see to the courage to feel to the courage to act.⁴

1. **The courage to see.** When I moved to Southwest Florida eight years ago one of my surprises was the incredible number of gated communities. It is possible, and for some even desirable, to spend much of their time within the confines of their communities' walls. The more time we spend around those who look like us the less able we are to really see the other when we journey out into the wider world that is Southwest Florida (much less beyond it).

Those of us who live in bubbles need to intentionally burst them from time to time. We need to be intentional about seeing the rich diversity right here in our community, including those who

² On May 6, 2015 I posted the following Facebook status: “Compassion. When you think of compassion who is the first person (or first few people) who come to mind?”

³ Frederick Buechner, originally published in *Wishful Thinking* and later in *Beyond Words*. Available online at <http://frederickbuechner.com/content/weekly-sermon-illustration-compassion>

⁴ John Philip Newell. *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings* (SkyLights Paths, 2015), p.17-27.

lack peace and joy because of all too real needs and struggles. We must find the courage to see.

2. The courage to feel. In congregation I served some years ago, the Board of Missions provided regularly recurring bus tours to introduce our church folks to many of the ministries our mission dollars supported. As each new group gathered at the church and prepared to board the bus the energy and enthusiasm was infectious.

While riding safe within the bus it was easy to stop at seeing. When we exited the bus and took guided walking tours that involved meeting real people and hearing real stories of our life-changing mission work, it stopped being about us and them and became about our shared commitment to a better tomorrow. In moving from sightseeing to life sharing, people found their own courage to feel.

3. The courage to act. Living with eyes wide open and emotions are steps that lead us down a path toward compassionate action. This final step requires that we move from saying we care to showing that we do. The courage to act is perhaps the hardest to begin, but one that can only be understood experientially. It is the type of endeavor for which the well-known Nike slogan is designed: "Just do it."

Another congregation I served had an active youth ministry program that involved all kinds of activities on and off the church campus. On one occasion we divided the group into small teams then sent them out in personal vehicles to engage in random acts of kindness. Our youth and their leaders blanketed the city with compassion, then reassembled to share their stories. While such an intense effort wasn't sustainable it changed perspectives. Months later students talked about how that opportunity gave them a courage they never knew possible, and how such a courage to act was now a part of their identity.

Courageous compassion is as easy as 1-2-3: The courage to see, the courage to feel, and the courage to act.

Gerard Hughes, a Scottish Jesuit priest and author, likes to tell a story that reminds us the way of compassion is a choice we must make anew each day.

In this story he imagines Jesus visiting a family – a family a lot like your family. Surprised and thrilled by Jesus’ arrival the family celebrates by throwing a party to introduce Jesus to all of their friends. All goes exceedingly well until Jesus decides to move in.

Once Jesus becomes a long-term house guest everything changes. Jesus makes it a regular practice of inviting the homeless and lots and lots of other people back to the house. The place is always loud and messy, and more food is consumed than at most restaurants. The neighbors begin to complain as property values begin to decline.

One day while Jesus is taking a nap, the family decides to take action. They permanently cover Jesus’ bedroom door, blending it into the wall as if it had never been there. In front of what had been the door they fashion an altar with candles and a cross so that they can properly respect and even worship Jesus.⁵

Friends, Jesus has shown us the way of compassion. Will you choose to merely talk about how nice the idea is or will you choose to actually live a life marked by courageous compassion?

Amen.

⁵ Ibid., p.24.