

August 20, 2017

How Compassionate are You?

John 5:1-9

Opening words: I have decided to take a short break from my sermon series on the Book of Acts, *Church Planting*. The reason is simple. I need a break. I will return next week and finish the twenty-first chapter. That will conclude our time in Acts for this summer. Today, I want to take us in another direction.

Our topic is compassion. The great German Roman Catholic theologian, Henri Nouwen, once explained compassion this way:

Compassion is not pity. Pity lets us stay at a distance. It is condescending.

Compassion is not sympathy. Sympathy is for superiors over inferiors.

Compassion is not charity. Charity is for the rich to continue in their status over the poor.

Compassion is born of God. It means entering into the other person's problems. It means taking on the burdens of the other. It means standing in the other person's shoes. It is the opposite of professionalism. It is the humanizing way to deal with people. Let me ask you this question: Do the people in your life consider you compassionate? Our scripture reading for today is John 5:1-9. Let me call this message, *How Compassionate are You?*

John 5:1-9 Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. ² Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³ Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. ⁵ One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?” ⁷ “Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.” ⁸ Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” ⁹ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath.

Albert Schweitzer once said, *“The purpose of human life is to serve and to show compassion and the will to serve others.”* I find wisdom in that quote. If you find some wisdom in that quote, say, **“Amen!”**

We find ourselves today in the fifth chapter of John. Jesus is in Jerusalem. According to the text, he is in the northeastern section of the Golden City. In that section of the city there were two public pools. In such a dry climate, any pool of water was highly valued. However, these pools had special significance. They believed these pools had healing power. The myth was simple. The healing power was unlocked by the angels. Every day

the sick waited for an angel to appear and touch the water with its wings. If you could get into the water before it settled, then you would be healed. With no other hope for healing, the sick and disabled assembled daily. Verse three says the blind, lame and paralyzed were represented. The crowd must have been heartbreaking.

Within this throng of desperate souls, we find this morning's main character. We don't know his name and we don't know why Jesus chose him. Perhaps, he was the most pitiful? We do know he had been disabled for thirty-eight years and was considered a regular at the pool. I find some humor in verse six. That verse says, "*When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, 'Do you want to get well?'*" (I bet it crossed his mind once or twice in thirty-eight years!) The man expresses the hopelessness of his situation and Jesus has compassion on him. In the end, Jesus heals the man and the man becomes a living testimony of the power of God. This story has always had a special place in my heart for one reason. The reason is simple. You can turn this story a million different ways and find only one reason the man was healed, compassion! Do the people in your life consider you compassionate? Webster defines compassion as *sympathetic pity or concern for the needs and misfortunes of others*.

The Bible is filled with verses about God's compassion. Psalm 51:1 says, "*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions.*" James 5:11 says it clearly, "*The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.*" In the fifteenth chapter of Matthew, Jesus left the Sea of Galilee and traveled to the mountaintop. The crowd traveled with him and brought Jesus all forms of disabilities. Once again, there was the blind, the lame, the crippled and the mute. Jesus heals them and has compassion on them. The question is not, if God is compassionate. The question is not, if Jesus had compassion. We can answer those questions easily, yes? The question is, are you compassionate? I hope the answer is yes, because compassion is one of the by-products of our faith. Both the believing and the non-believing value compassion. If you value compassion, say, "**Amen!**"

Cicely Saunders (1918-2015) was led to Christ at Oxford University by a colorful English professor named C. S. Lewis. Lacking any kind of direction in her life, she left Oxford and began studying nursing. After graduating, she began working on a cancer ward in a London hospital. Gradually, she came to realize most of the doctors ignored the terminally ill. As a result, she watched many virtually die alone. Greatly troubled by this revelation, she developed a plan. She approached the hospital administration with her plan. She wanted to surround the terminally ill with friends and loved ones during their last days, rather than isolating them in sterile rooms with strangers. Her radical ideas were quickly rejected. Frustrated, she enrolled in medical school because she wanted her voice to be heard. Six years later, at the age of 39, she graduated from medical school and began to enact her plan. Her plan became popular in England during the 1950's and was soon adopted by many Americans. Today, we know that movement as Hospice. How many people have you known that have died under Hospice care? In a

world that is not afraid to complain, I have never heard anyone complain about Hospice. It all began because a Christian woman had compassion. Do the people in your life consider you compassionate?

Compassion is important because **life is hard**. I could preach on the harshness of life and the topic would never grow old. If you think you are the only one with a problem then you are a fool. Richard Needham once said there are seven stages in life:

1. The spills
2. The drills
3. The thrills
4. The bills
5. The ills
6. The pills
7. The wills.

Everyone is in one of these stages. Which one are in you today? It really doesn't matter because every stage of life seems to be challenging. The spills stage comes when you are the youngest. I hear children cry daily in daycare. The drills stage is when you are in school. It is not just a time to make friends; it is a time to take tests. During the thrills stage, you have to discern your future. I am in the bills stage. Does anyone here like paying bills? Is anyone here in the ills stage or the pills stage? That doesn't sound like much fun. Do you know of anyone in the final stage, the wills stage? This is the point I am trying to make: Life is hard!

Every day, I go home for supper and look at my wife and say, "We have no problems!" Do you know why I feel like I have no problems? Because, I have spent the day listening to your problems. I hear about people's horrible financial problems. I hear about people's broken relationships. I hear about people's addictions. I hear about people's cancer, in addition to all their other medical problems. I hear about people's mistakes and misunderstandings. I hear about people's legal problems. I hear it all, but don't get me wrong. I am not complaining, but there are days I suffer from compassion overload. I hate to see good people suffer. Let me say this clearly, life is hard. If you agree life is hard, say, "**Amen!**"

Life is hard for everyone, but **some people are desperate**. I have been praying for the person who broke into our garage because you would have to be desperate to break into a church garage. Have you ever been desperate? Have you ever known someone who is desperate?

In March of 2012, my daughter, Anna, went to El Salvador. It was her first time out of the American bubble. You do know we live in a bubble? It was the first time she experienced true poverty. Did you know the average family in El Salvador makes \$400 annually? Did you know the average family in Ohio makes \$40,000? There really isn't much of a comparison. How do you exist on \$400 a year? The problem is not just a lack

of money. The problem is a lack of hope. I can't say this too strongly: The people of El Salvador are desperate! However, you don't have to go to Central America to witness desperate people. There are many desperate people right here.

There is a website called the Daily Finance. They tell us only 14% of Americans who are 28 and 29 years old feel optimistic about their financial future. There is a desperateness growing in our land. Psychologists tell us people change when they become desperate. They become more paranoid, bold and unpredictable.

That is what happened to 36-year-old Heidi Knowles of Vancouver, Washington. The only word you can use for her is desperate. She didn't have a job; she didn't have a home. She was living in a hotel, nearly homeless. Some say she was suffering from postpartum depression. Some say she was a nut. Some say she was just desperate. Everyone agrees upon the fact, she was wrong. She tried to sell her three-day-old baby boy in front of a Taco Bell in July of 2011. She was willing to sell her baby for between \$500 and \$5000. How desperate do you have to be to sell your own child? There are some desperate people in this world. Do you know any desperate people? If you can agree there are desperate people in this world, say, "**Amen!**" This is the Good News for today:

Jesus cares! In a world where no one seems to care, Jesus cares! Look at the text for today one more time. Jesus is in Jerusalem. He passes by a pool called Bethesda. It is surrounded by the countless disabled and disfigured. There was the blind, the lame and the crippled. Some had been disabled from birth. Some had been disabled in some horrible accident. There is no other way to say it. They were hard to look at and harder to smell. With all those sad faces surrounding Jesus, the Master picks out one man. Perhaps, that man was the most pitiful. His life wasn't just hard. He was desperate. He had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. His hopes of a happy life had died years ago. His only hope of survival was the generosity of the worshippers who came to Jerusalem for the festival. His only hope for a healing was a miracle. His only hope of escape was death. Then, Jesus came along and everything changed because he had compassion on him.

Years ago, Kathryn and I were on a mission trip. In those days, the Russian economy was truly struggling. We were outside of St. Petersburg, Russia. On Sunday morning, the group decided to worship at the local Russian Orthodox Church. It was not one of those places tourists go; it was one of those places the locals go. Years earlier, it was built by a wealthy land owner, who had it constructed in memory of his daughter. We walked by the old family home. It sat in ruins because the Nazis had bombed it during the Second World War. The church was not built with church growth in mind. The church had two stories, with a chapel on each floor. A body lay in state in the first floor chapel. We worshipped on the second floor.

When we arrived, two things grabbed my attention. The first was the heavy incense. The second was the crowd. When we walked in, the locals just stared at us. In a few minutes, they began offering us candles to burn at the icons. We stayed for a few minutes and then we decided to leave. We climbed down uneven stairs and looked to exit. When we walked out the front door, it was hard to leave because the beggars lined the stairs. We were generous with each one. However, there was one woman who stood out. She was the most pitiful. She was an old Russian woman who had no legs. She sat at the bottom of the stairs in a homemade cart. Someone had rolled her into that position. You could not help but be moved by her plight. Kathryn reached into her bag and gave her the most. The woman responded with a toothless smile. She grabbed her hand and said in her native tongue, "Thank-you, thank-you, thank-you." It was one of those incredible experiences in my life. We were not just Americans on that day. We weren't just volunteers on a mission trip. We were even more than Christians. We were reminders that Jesus cares! Jesus cared about each one of those beggars. Jesus cared about the legless woman in the manmade cart. Here is the fact you should never forget: Jesus cares about you! Albert Schweitzer once said, "*The purpose of human life is to serve and to show compassion and the will to serve others.*" How compassionate are you? And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"