

Called to Compassion
Matthew 9:35-10:4
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Jamie Boleyn writes, “While going through a divorce, my mother fretted over her new worries: no income, the same bills, and no way to afford groceries. It was around this time that she started finding boxes of food outside our door every morning. This went on for months until she was able to land a job. We never did find out who left the groceries, but they truly saved our lives.”

Miranda MacLean tells this story, “My neighbor Jim had trouble deciding if he wanted to retire from the construction field until he ran into a younger man he’d worked with previously. The man had a wife and three children, and was finding it difficult to make ends meet, as he hadn’t worked in some time. The next morning Jim went to the union office and submitted his retirement paperwork. As for his replacement, he gave them the name of the struggling young man. That was six years ago, and that young husband and father has been employed ever since.”

Sheela Mayes writes, “Children were playing at the recreation area of an IKEA store when my five-year-old granddaughter motioned for a small boy to stop. She knelt down before him and retied his flopping shoelaces—she had only just learned to tie her own. No words were spoken, but after she finished, both smiled shyly, then turned to race off in different directions” (Reader’s Digest Editors, Sept. 16, 2024, [30 Stories on Kindness | Kind Stories That Will Warm Your Heart](#)).

These happen to be stories from a collection by Reader’s Digest in 2024, but I know that each of us has our own stories of kindness, generosity, and compassion...stories of both giving compassion and receiving it.

Jesus had his stories as well. Because, after all, compassion was what drove him.

But let’s talk about that word for a moment. Compassion. It’s a word we use often. But what does it really mean?

Because sometimes we use it to indicate feelings of sympathy or pity for others who are struggling. But that’s not really what compassion is. After all, those feelings allow us to stay at a safe distance. Sympathy and pity are much less engaged than compassion.

But if we look at its roots, “compassion” combines two words and literally means “to suffer with.”

So, if we are to have compassion, then we cannot stand at a safe distance. We cannot simply hope that things will get better. We cannot protect ourselves from all risks.

Rather, when we live from compassion, then we live from a commitment to be so close to other people, and to all creation, that we will even suffer with them.

Here in Matthew, our reading comes after a number of healing stories. Jesus had been healing many people - we talked about some of these last week. Just in chapter 9 of this gospel we hear that he healed someone who was paralyzed, he healed a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years, he raised a child declared dead, he healed two blind men and a person who was mute.

But, remember what we said last week, these healings weren't just about restoring bodies to that which was considered healthy or normal. These healings were about restoring people to community. Jesus healed because he saw the ways the systems of power and privilege were shaped to cut people out more easily than they drew them in.

In fact, in Matthew 9:36 we read, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (NRSV).

And, if you know your Bible, you likely recognize this language. Jesus certainly would have known these images from the Hebrew scriptures. See, this was the same complaint the prophets offered time and time again as they witnessed those in power neglecting the needs of the people for their own selfish gain.

Back in Ezekiel 34 we hear a great example of this when we read, "The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them - to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them" (Ezekiel 34:1-6, NRSV).

This critique of those in power was a long standing critique...it is a long standing critique. For still today, just as in the time of the Hebrew prophets, just as in the time of Jesus, still today too many people are neglected, too many people are used, too many people are treated as tools to move those in power toward greater abundance. Too many people are bearing the burden of the cost of the wealth and power of only a few.

Because when compassion is lacking, then we turn away from our neighbors...we forget that we are a "we" instead of an "I"...we stand at a distance with a false sense of security while our neighbors struggle.

But, Jesus, seeing the crowds had compassion on them.

And did you notice what happened next? His compassion led to community and to action. He saw how many people were hurting and how few were living from compassion. And he invited others into this work.

And it's so important that we notice the compassion in this passage. See, too often Matthew 9:37, where he says, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few..." (NRSV), too often that verse has been used as an evangelism text to promote going out and converting people. And too often those conversions have happened by any means necessary.

But when we read this in context, we are reminded that Jesus was calling people to compassion. He looked around and saw the poor and the oppressed. He watched those in power and saw how they succeeded by stepping on the backs of the people. There were so many who were suffering and so few working to relieve their pain.

But Jesus called people to join in his work, to go and cast out demons and heal diseases, to see people in the midst of their pain and to act in ways that set them free and returned them to wholeness, which included full connection with the community.

This is the work the disciples were called to.

This is the work we are called to. And more than being work, compassion is the way we are called to live.

As Joyce Rupp writes, "Compassion is a way of life - an inner posture of how to be with suffering, both our own and others, and a desire to move that attitude into action. Compassion involves an 'inside-out' movement. A radical change unfolds in us when compassion becomes a way of life, a transformation as far-reaching as an acorn growing into a tree, an egg producing a chicken, or a caterpillar metamorphosing into a butterfly" (Joyce Rupp in *Boundless Compassion: Creating a Way of Life*, [Joyce Rupp — Boundless Compassion](#)).

Compassion. It is the way of life to which we are called. And the place from which we are to live.

Compassion. It is a gift that when we share it, can transform the world. Amen.