

Christ's Radical Compassion

Matthew 9:35-10:8

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost/ 9th July 2017

“When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt. 9:36). Crowds. Crowds of people. Hundreds? Thousands? We don't know. But lots of people followed him, attracted to his message of hope, proclaiming good news, the *euangelion*, the evangel, the evangelical message that God's kingdom, God's realm—the radical, life-giving, justice-bearing realm of God—has come near—to *them!* God's realm has come to them, to those needing healing and liberation, to people harassed and helpless, victims of political and societal oppression, subjugated by forces and powers (spiritual, political, religious) weighing them down, breaking their backs. Jesus came for them. His message was for them. His ministry, his life, yes, he was sent for them, “the least of these” (Mt. 25:45).

Compassion. This is our theme this summer. It's here in the text, front and center. *Esplagchnisthe*. It's a form of the rare Greek verb *splagchnizomai*, meaning something like “torn up in the gut.” *Splagchnon* is the Greek word for viscera, internal organs, intestines and bowel. When Jesus looked out and saw the faces in the crowd, when he saw that they were “harassed” and “helpless,” it tore up his insides. The Greek even suggests that they were at the point of fainting and being tossed about. It made him sick to his stomach. It was gut-wrenching. That's exactly where compassion originates—in the gut.

Today, science has shown that we both think and feel with our stomachs, through the Enteric Nervous System. Michael Gershon is professor at Columbia University, and chair of pathology and cell biology. “The gut,” he says, “can work independently of any control by the brain in your head—it's functioning as a second brain. It's another independent center of integrative neural activity.”[\[1\]](#)

The Enteric Nervous System (ENS) has 100 million neurons—more than in the spinal cord but a lot fewer than in the brain—arrayed over an intricately folded surface area more than a hundred times greater than that of your skin. The ENS can work all on its own, without any input from the brain, to control the movement and absorption of food throughout the intestines.[\[2\]](#)

“The nervous system [which includes the brain] actually started out in the gut,” says Emeran Mayer. He's the director of the UCLA Center for Neuro-visceral Sciences and Women's Health as well as of the UCLA Center for Neurobiology of Stress. “Most of my patients,” he says, “have a very good understanding that there is a close connection between their emotions and their guts. But there are still very few neuroscientists who understand the complexity of this enteric nervous system and its links to the brain.”[\[3\]](#)

Contemporary science is verifying what the ancients knew. What they knew is embedded in language, in the etymology of the Greek word for compassion, *esplagnisthel splagchnizomai*. Powerful emotional states are felt in the stomach. Jesus' emotional response to people in need originated in his stomach. His interaction with what was going on around him, his response to what he saw, were all registered there, in his gut. His gut felt something, received something. He couldn't stomach

what he saw. This depth of feeling made his stomach turn, and from that *internal turning*, he *acted*—and so changed the lives of these people, so changed the world.

That's where compassion begins to emerge, not in the head, through thought, but in the gut. We don't think our way toward compassion. We can, of course, choose to be compassionate—and we certainly need more of this these days. But I'm not sure we think our way toward being compassionate. Jesus didn't say, "I think I need to be compassionate toward these people," and then tell his gut to turn in knots. Jesus' response was not orchestrated or calculated or strategic.

Compassion flows spontaneously, naturally from a deep place, in response to a *felt experience* in the moment. Compassion flows out from a feeling. That's where and how compassion is born.

The English word *compassion*, means "with passion," and passion means "to suffer." When we suffer, we feel. And to feel the way Jesus felt in that moment encountering human desperation, seeing his people harassed and helpless, was a form of suffering. Feeling this way is to suffer. And, suffering, in a way, is required to be compassionate. I wonder, are we less compassionate than we could be because we're unwilling to suffer?

To *suffer* means "to undergo." It often has negative connotations, of course, but we can suffer joy or love as much as suffer pain or sorrow or loss. To suffer is to undergo a felt experience, one that touches us deeply, which affects us, infects us, washes over us, maybe even overwhelms us; it stirs us, excites us, disturbs us, moves us. The feelings come upon us. We might resist them, fight against them. There are times when we want to deny or resist or contain a feeling; perhaps we're afraid where it might take us. Perhaps we will be overcome, perhaps we will go under as we undergo a feeling, whether joy or sadness. To suffer means we allow the feeling to flow over and under and through us.

We can either acknowledge the feeling or we can ignore it. We can either honor what we're feeling when we're confronted with joy or pain or grief or we can deny it. Sometimes, to be honest, it's easier not to feel, to keep our distance from feelings. Sometimes we think our way out of feeling by being too rational or critical or analytical, which can be a kind of defense. Or, we judge. Judging is often a defense. Judging people or judging a situation is often a strategy that we use to protect ourselves from suffering with or for others. Perhaps that's why theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1909-1945) wrote in 1943, from Tegel prison in Berlin, "We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer."^[4]

Sometimes we prefer to intellectualize everything (which Presbyterians are good at), keep it all up in our heads, and never allow our humanity and the humanity of others who stand before us to touch us and shape us. It can be a defense mechanism our egos use to prevent us from getting hurt. Such a strategy might keep us safe for a time. But the defense mechanism cuts us off from the rest of the world; it separates us from our neighbor, it distances us from the masses of people who are harassed and helpless and desperate.

If we're going to truly regard another's suffering, then we need to be present to them, and we can't be fully present without feeling. The poet Christopher Fry (1907-2005) once said, "The human heart can go the lengths of God."^[5] When we are fully present to the moment, fully present to the suffering of others—not running from it or judging it or becoming numb to it—

fully present to the pain and suffering in our own lives, and then respond to each situation from our gut in a loving, life-giving way, something miraculous occurs: we become more human! Jesus is continually saying, “Look at me! See how I live. *This* is what being human looks like. A human being responds to the needs of the world through compassion. A human being allows oneself to be touched by the suffering of the world.” And, as Jesus showed with his life, the divine becomes even more apparent—when we become more human! The divine emanates in and through and with our humanity. This was true for Jesus, but not only Jesus. Our lives become Godlike, they become divine, the divine emanates through us when we are truly, authentically human.

The turning of his stomach moves Jesus to act. He summons the twelve disciples. And then he gives them authority. He sends them out to preach the good news. What is the good news? “The Kingdom of God has come near.” How do we know where the kingdom or the realm of God is? Wherever you see healing and liberation. “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.”

Jesus gives them authority. He authorizes them. We need to understand this authority as power. He gives them power, muscle, agency, the ability to act, to make something happen. Jesus gives them power over other lesser powers or principalities. That’s what it meant in the ancient world to have authority over “unclean spirits.” Their world was charged with the belief that spirits, powers, principalities in the cosmos, in society, were oppressing their lives, actually possessing people, leaving them helpless, powerless, without agency, without options, without freedom; these forces were making the people depressed and sick and helpless. This is how we should understand release from “unclean spirits” and all the exorcisms that Jesus conducted in his ministry.

Now, it’s easy for us to think that the ancient world was so primitive in their thinking, that we have moved beyond them, and that, therefore, this commission to heal, which Jesus gives his disciples, is just a fantasy. We need to think symbolically, not literally. When we view this symbolically, we discover that we are not unlike those harassed and helpless people in the crowds. We, too, are struggling in a turbulent sea of currents and forces and philosophies and economies and ideologies that are oppressing us, possessing us, leaving us helpless and powerless, making us feel that we have no agency, no options, no meaning, no hope—and it’s making us depressed and sick.

Greg Carey, who teaches New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary, insists that this is how we should read Jesus’ command to drive out demons. “Many (all?) people,” he suggests, “find themselves bound by behaviors, patterns, or structures they cannot escape, often cursing themselves when they repeat the same behavior time and again. When we imagine the realm of exorcism, let us imagine liberation, freedom from powers that constrain us and prevent us from living full human lives.”^[6]

So, Jesus sends us out to preach good news. What is the good the news? “The Kingdom of God has come near.” How do we know where the kingdom or realm is? How do we know when we’ve stumbled into God’s domain? *Wherever you see healing and liberation*—God’s realm is near. Whenever you help in the healing and liberation of God’s people—God’s realm is near. If you’re standing in the way of healing and liberation, then God’s realm is very far from you. But, when we help in the healing and liberation of God’s people, you can be sure God’s Realm is very near indeed. *We might not be able to raise the dead, but through compassion we can bring about new life.*

How do we offer healing and liberation? This is a tall order. This isn't easy. There isn't one way. You need to figure out what that looks like where you live, where you work.

We start with compassion. We start by paying attention to our stomachs. Our stomachs need to turn.

Where is your stomach turning? Where is it getting torn up? We need to stomach the suffering in the world. This is a radical call to the Church, radical, as in *radix*, meaning cutting to the roots, for we get to the root of things here when we consider what compassion as felt experience will do in our lives and through us for the world.

Compassion requires being open to the needs of the other, willing to receive the suffering of the world or your neighbor or your soul, to be present to it. To suffer with. To undergo. We don't have to take on all the suffering of the world or alleviate all the suffering of the world—this is not our task—but we can be moved by it. We can allow the suffering of the world to touch us. We might be surprised that we're able to stomach more than we think. Maybe we Christians need to move even more in the direction of what we cannot stomach, to listen to our guts, to feel, to allow ourselves to be touched, influenced by the suffering of God's children, and from *that* tender place discern what we're being called to do.

We have the authority to be healers and liberators. Healing and liberation flow from feelings of compassion. To have compassion is to suffer with, to undergo in some capacity the suffering of the world. Jesus sets the pattern. We work, with Jesus, in the alleviation of human suffering, only after we have noticed the faces of those in need and share in their suffering.

And so, Jesus sends us, not away from, but into the world. He sends us deeper and deeper and deeper down into the human condition, to announce and to embody with our lives God's good news. God's healing and liberation are real—and near.

[1] Dan Hurley, "Your Backup Brain," *Psychology Today* (November 1, 2011), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/201111/your-backup-brain>

[2] Hurley.

[3] Hurley.

[4] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Touchstone, 1997), 10.

[5] Christopher Fry, *Sleep of Prisoners* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), 47.

[6] Greg Carey, Commentary on Matthew 9:35-10:8 [9-23], http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=98.