



Real Compassion

Christopher B. Harbin

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

We have all seen a hungry child and been moved to do something: make a donation, offer a meal, bemoan injustice, or quickly avert our eyes to the crisis and refuse to take any responsibility. When our hearts are moved with pity and we let go of a minor portion of our excess to assuage our guilt, we can hardly call that true compassion. What does real compassion look like?

Paul reminded the Ephesians that God had brought them into the body of Christ, despite the fact that they did not belong to the chosen people. While they did not live under the pact established with God, they had been welcomed under God's compassion, grace and love. God's compassion, love, and acceptance came through Jesus' death on the cross, at great personal cost to God. It was God's desire to create intimacy and fellowship with humanity, growing out of compassion for our needs for that same communion, fellowship, and participation in what we call the family of God.

We tend to be good at compassion when it comes to our family members, especially as regards spouses and children. We may easily see their needs and take responsibility for addressing them, simply because we have the power to do so. This category of compassion often does not even feel like compassion. In caring for friends and family, we act and feel as though we were addressing our own needs. There is little thought for the "otherness" of the person reached by our compassion. They simply become an extension of self. Perhaps, this is the heart of true compassion.

Paul spoke of the barriers broken down by Christ Jesus,¹ those things that separate us into categories of otherness. He placed an end to enmity between categories or classes of people in order that we might live as one family, joined together in fellowship with God the Father. The point was peace both with God and one another, no longer acting or responding to others as strangers.

That is what we see in Jesus' examples of compassion and care for the crowds that seemed so often to press in on him. We would have considered the situations he confronted as interruptions in his plans and purposes. No doubt, the disciples considered them such. Even Mark's words describing Jesus and the crowds seem to paint a picture of interruptions, misdirection, and side-tracking Jesus from his real purposes. Jesus and the twelve did not even have the freedom to eat together, due to the pressing needs engulfing them. Mark says Jesus himself took the initiative to go elsewhere to be alone and rest, yet even that attempt was in vain. Crowds just met them at their place of retreat.

Jesus seems oh, so human in Mark's description. He appears blissfully unaware that the crowds would simply determine where he was heading and arrive before Jesus and the twelve. At first blush, it looks as if they were taken by surprise at the response of the hungering crowds. Jesus says, "Let's go away someplace quiet," only to arrive and begin teaching the crowds many things. Mark says it was a matter of compassion. He portrays Jesus as sensing the need of the people for direction, guidance, protection, and comfort. They needed feeding and Jesus responded with compassion.

Today's reading misses the intervening story, but Mark goes on to paint another picture of compassion as Jesus tell the disciples to care for the physical needs of these people, as well. At their failure, he then goes on to feed them with the loaves and fishes offered by one young boy. Then back on the other side of the lake, Jesus was approached again by crowds seeking his attention. Mark says it was a constant refrain of his ministry at this point. When Jesus arrived at any place, they would parade their sick or crippled before him to be touched at least by his shadow.

¹ Ephesians 2:11-22.
<http://www.fbc-h.org/>

So how did Jesus respond to all this? What do we do with Jesus' expressed, but seemingly unfulfilled desire for self-care? We can brush much aside with an understanding that he was only around for three years of ministry. One's body can put up with abuse for a limited time. Jesus did not have to model the same kind of self-care, as he did not plan on being around for a long ministry. At the same time, Mark takes pains to show that Jesus' actions and words were consistently planned to teach and mold the disciples, leading them in their exercise of ministry and service to God's reign. His words and actions were not accidental, but were always planned and purposeful.

It is telling that after a while Jesus sends the disciples on in the boat. He is in no hurry to leave. The disciples go on while he is still sending the crowds away and taking his leave. His ministry continues while the disciples take their respite. Perhaps that is in part a clue for us in regard to self-care. Jesus expresses acknowledgement of the disciples' need, while he continues to minister to the crowds. It may be that his life is quickly burning out, but he takes pains to care for the needs of his disciples. In the meantime, he teaches them about compassion and God's response to human need.

The disciples have come from a mission trip, overjoyed and bubbling over at what God has done through them. They leave with Jesus to debrief their experience. He brings them to a hungry crowd that is yearning to learn of God and whose physical needs are apparent and pressing. He calls them to turn from their celebration to participate in continuing to care for others. It is, after all, the appropriate expression of life in God. His actions in teaching and feeding call them to look not so much after their own experiences. They are enjoined by his words and actions to attune their attention to the pressing needs around them, "at home" after their experiential journey. He grants opportunity for debriefing, but they are not allowed to "wallow" in the afterglow.

They debriefed en route to ministry on the other side of the lake. They were challenged to trust God further in ministries of compassion that would take them beyond the limits of their experience. Jesus then chased them off to talk among themselves. When they met again, he took them once more to opportunities to express compassion, God's compassion, for the ever needy multitude.

Jesus' compassion apparently knew no boundaries. Jesus' compassion was the expression of God's very real compassion for the multitude of needs facing him on every side. By his example, Jesus taught his followers to pay careful attention to the needy that surrounded them on every side. By example, he taught them to think and attend less to their own desires, dreams, and ambitions, while focusing more on the needs accosting them amid their daily travels.

Jesus' compassion was unlimited by geography, status, or intimate knowledge of individuals. He looked at people and simply assessed their needs. He did not weigh their worth as individuals or membership in a family or tribe. He looked at them as though the resources on which he drew were unlimited. He assumed the fount of God's blessing and provision would not run dry. He considered that God's compassion and concern were no less than his own. He assumed that since God's compassion is unlimited, there is no reason our compassion should know limits.

The disciples simply could not focus on their responsibility to see others with the eyes of God's compassion. Sure, they had been bubbling over with joy at what God had done through them on their missionary journey. The problem seems to be that they were too consumed with the emotions of their experience to truly focus on the people they had served and those God would have them continue serving. They were stuck on themselves and failed to see the multitudes around them.

Is that the issue in our own failed attempts at compassion? Do not trust God's provision to be sufficient for us to focus on the needs around us? Or are we just so preoccupied with our own issues that we remain blind to the living realities of people all around us? Real compassion requires seeing people. Are we even looking, or are we too preoccupied with lesser things to notice?

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