

Mark 6: 30-34

Jesus: A Man of Compassion

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While ministering up in Vermont, I was part of a group of clergy who would cover the overnight chaplain's duties at the big hospital. Our job was to pick up the pager at around 3 p.m. and then be ready to attend to any need we might be called to until about 8 am the following morning.

At first I was very excited about the prospect of wearing a pager. Having grown up without any real tech gadgets, clipping a pager to my belt made me feel really grown up and, well, a little important. Once the novelty wore off, I realized that I really did not like this thing. It actually made me nervous. Since it could go off at any moment, I never slept well with the pager in the house. I worried I would miss hearing it.

The funny thing is that during those 4 ½ years in Vermont, I had the pager in my possession about 50 times, and it went off only once. But it came at a bad time. It was 2 a.m. I was in a busy stretch work wise, and I had just gotten over a bad cold. Honestly, in that moment in time, I was not too excited about dragging myself out of bed, trying to find some matching clothes, matting down the hair, and getting to the hospital to attend to the emergency. The emergency was saying prayers with a family whose grandmother had just died.

My unhappiness about having to leave the warmth and comfort of my bed might have been caused by a very mild case to CF – Compassion Fatigue.

Compassion Fatigue is also known as secondary traumatic stress (STS), deemed a psychological disorder first diagnosed in nurses in the 1950s. Higher degrees of CF have been found in the caring professions but it actually happens to all of us. You might be more familiar with CF when it manifests itself as burnout, lack of interest, or when you realize that you've simply had it.

You might have caught a serious case of CF when you can't watch one more report of children dying from hunger in Africa, or people trying to put their lives together after an earthquake or hurricane, or when you get mad at the many requests for donations near and far.

As I did my research for this sermon I came across an interview by Krista Tippett on "On Being" with Nicholas Kristof. Mr. Kristof makes it his business to go to some of the most dangerous, most appalling places on earth, from there he reports on abuses and violence in hope that people who can do something about it will do so

In the interview he talks about "compassion fatigue." Since he is in the business of trying to motivate people to help others, he has made a study of what inspires people. What led him to this was that he had been writing over a period of months about the atrocities in Darfur, and people weren't responding.

He said that it felt like his reporting was "disappearing into the pond without a ripple." At the same time there was a huge furor in NYC over the red-tailed hawk "Pale Male" and his mate "Lola." They were hawks nesting on a building on 5th Ave. The management of the building decided to remove the nest and the trusses that support it which caused a huge uproar. It was front page news of all the papers. Bird lovers picketed the building and raised such a fuss that the management left the birds be. At the same time, Kristof says, hundreds of thousand of people were being driven from their homes in Darfur, and he couldn't get anyone to pay attention.

So he asked "Why is that?" As he found out the human psyche is well equipped to react and deal and care for an individual's story. Compassion fatigue sets in as the number of victims increases. Research has actual shown that we begin to show fatigue when the number of victims reaches two.

The idea of compassion fatigue really stayed with me. As a daily consumer of news, there are times when I simply have to turn off the radio or TV because I feel so overwhelmed by it all – people being killed in Syria, the constant troubles in Afghanistan, the threats made by North Korea, the fights over gun control or budgets that make the rich richer, and the poor poorer. There are so many ways to see our world as broken and a feeling of hopelessness can come over us.

I wonder sometimes how Jesus felt as he tackled the issues and problems of his day. Where there moments he felt compassion fatigue? Or did he find a way to power through despair and hopelessness of his time and place?

Today's scripture reading is one of many that tell us that he was a man of great compassion. We are told in the gospels that compassion was the motivator for Jesus' actions. What made Jesus unique was the unrestrained compassion he felt for the poor and the oppressed, the sick and the outcast, the hungry and thirsty, the lost and dejected. The parables he told were of compassion – of kings forgiving debts, of fathers welcoming their children home, of good Samaritans taking care of the highway robbery casualties.

'Compassion' was Jesus' 'middle name', deeply imbedded in his personality, character, and identity. But I don't think that he was compassionate solely for personal reasons or to make himself feel good; actually not for personal reasons at all.

What was the point he was trying to make? Jesus wanted to give people a different view of God – not that of a distant, vengeful and legalistic God, but the God he experienced, loved and believed in; a God who is present, accessible, compassionate and passionate.

Jesus believed in a compassionate God, and he made it his life's mission to embody and to teach about the compassion of God so that people would be compassionate as God is compassionate. Compassion is the very quality of God. God as compassionate is life giving, nourishing, embracing; God feeds the birds, clothes the lilies, like a mother cares for her children, like a father who welcomes back the lost son. But God's compassion can also become fierce when God's children are being victimized by others because God is passionate about justice. God's compassion is not about getting what you want, but what you need and what is right.

For Jesus, compassion would lead to two things desperately needed in his world: charity and justice.

The word charity is derived from *caritas*, Latin for love. It is the personal form of compassion. Its objective is to alleviate the effects of suffering. Charity seeks to heal wounds.

Justice on the other hand seeks to eliminate the root causes of suffering. It is about transforming the social structures and systems that produce poverty and suffering. Justice is the social form of compassion. It is the social and political form of caring for the least of these. Justice seeks to end the social structures that create wounded people in the first place.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

“We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be beaten and robbed as they make their journey through life. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice that produces beggars needs restructuring.”

William Sloane Coffin has said: “The bible is less concerned with alleviating the effects of injustice, than in eliminating the causes of it.”

Both charity and justice are needed in our world. Jesus called for both. He embodied both. The question is do we favor charity over justice? In an unjust world, only the first response—charity—is acceptable to those in power. The work of church, of faith-based charities, of communities of faith is often lauded by government until they try to influence government policies to change the status quo.

Dom Helder Camara, a Roman Catholic bishop from the poor Brazilian region of Recife said in the 1960s, “When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a Communist.”

John Dominic Crossan once said, “Charity gets you canonized; justice gets you crucified.”

That is exactly where the religion of Jesus led him. He knew it would, and yet he kept on going – one meal at a time, one healing touch at a time, one challenge at a time. He did not change course. That is what made him such an amazing and inspiring human being, someone I/we try to imitate, follow, and need to take seriously each and every day.

When Krista Tippett started her interview with Nicholas Kristof, she said: “You know you are a lot less depressing that I’d thought you’d be.” Kristof just laughed. He said that though he had seen

very dreadful things in his life, he always ends up focusing on the people who step forward to help.
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Maybe that is a good way to ward off compassion fatigue. There is no pill that can cure it but there are people, people everywhere - private citizens, people in churches, in faith-based and civil organizations - who bring “compassion energy” to the table that is inspiring and hope giving. We, this church, or any single person cannot solve all the world’s problems, but together we can do some, maybe even only one thing at a time.

We are here for the purpose of doing some good – caring for one another, reaching out even beyond these walls, beyond this neighborhood, doing one small thing to improve the situation of other human beings. The world’s problems are not insoluble if we all, every single one of us, just starts somewhere.

That is God’s call to each of us. Each one of us is called by God, by our Christian faith, to do what we can to make this world a better place, to be as compassionate as God is compassionate. Amen.

Sources:

1. If you like to hear the whole interview with Nicholas Kristof, go to: www.onbeing.org; search for Nicholas Kristof, go to Journalism and Compassion (Feb. 9, 2012)