

The Discomfort of Being Merciful

Luke 10:25ff and Mark 1:29-39

Great Commandment

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We are coming to the end of our series on the Great Commandment to “love God with all your heart, mind soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.” We have been looking at these commands and digging a little deeper into how we can apply it to our daily lives and deepen our faith through spiritual practices that express care and love? How do we grow in love for God and for one another so we can fulfill this command? One question is then, how do we love God with our heart and how is that expressed in loving one another?

When I think of loving with the heart I think of care and compassion. You know the saying, “you have such a big heart.” It is someone who is moved by another person’s suffering even to the point of action. It is also something we see Jesus do often throughout his ministry. Often before a miracle happens, we see Jesus have an emotional response to a need and then he acts. I think it is a good and normal response to be moved by human suffering and to want to do something. But it also means being willing to not turn away because it is uncomfortable.

In today’s readings we see in the Psalms the many ways that God is praised for being merciful and providing for the needs of humanity and creation. Verses like “The Lord heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.” And “The Lord covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, makes grass grow on the hills. The Lord gives to the animals their food and to the young ravens when they cry.” These are all expressions of God’s merciful compassion and love for the world. God provides for us to ease suffering and sustain life.

Learning to be merciful starts with those closest to us. We see this in today's Gospel reading. It is set at the beginning of Jesus ministry. Jesus has just called the first four disciples and even in the very beginning they are meeting one another's needs and caring for each other. Jesus comes to Peter's house and hears that his mother is sick. Jesus heals her and she is restored to the community. But Jesus' care and compassion is not limited to just his friends. Later on we see Jesus with crowds of people seeking care as he heals many until late into the evening. Early the next morning Jesus slips away to pray, and people are upset that they can't find him. When the disciples finally find him, they say, "people are seeking you to receive more healing." But instead of Jesus staying in the town and heal the crowds Jesus says to them, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do." Jesus recognizes the subtle enticement to keep our compassion for a select few. He could have kept it just for the disciples, or just stayed in the town where he was living. Instead, he expands the concept of neighbor once again to other places and people. Through Jesus' work he teaches the disciples to also heal and preach the good news. Even after his death, the ministry he started is carried on by the disciples and others as it spreads far and wide. At one point in the early church, a dispute arose. Some argued that salvation found in Jesus was only for the Jewish people because Jesus was Jewish while others argued that it was also for others including the Romans and gentiles or non-Jewish people. They pointed to gentile converts like Cornelius, Paul's work in Asia Minor and Peter's vision as proof of the expansiveness of God's grace for the world.

So, who is really our neighbor? Is it only people who are physically next to us? Is it only people who look like us or sound like us? Is it limited to a certain age group or demographic? Maybe it only relates to people that believe like us? What about our enemies do they count as neighbors too? These are the uncomfortable questions of mercy. Yet we remember Jesus also said love your enemies in Matthew 5:43-45.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

Jesus answers this question “who is my neighbor”, in Luke 10 with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan man was the unlikely hero in the story. He represented a group of people that many in the crowd would avoid and discriminate against. What made him the hero of the story?

In the story three people saw the person in need. Each had the opportunity to help or ignore the person’s obvious need for help. Each one could easily think of reasons why they should not or could not stop and help. But only one was willing to put the needs of the other before their own. Only one was willing to stay with the discomfort of the need of another and help and do what he could to care for them. It was his ability to put the needs of the other first that made him good. In the end Jesus asks the crowd, who was the neighbor. They answered, “The one who showed mercy”. Interesting. He was no longer identified as the Samaritan, but as the merciful one. His actions are what made him the hero of the story. None of the three men were inherently good or bad. It was not their ethnicity or religious identity that made them good or bad, it was their ability to act upon their own pity for the person in need and show mercy.

Mercy is an attribute of God and relates to the word compassion. To have compassion is to identify with the emotional state of another. To be merciful is to alleviate suffering that may or may not have been caused because of sin.

Another text in the Gospel that lifts this up is Matthew 25 – In this parable God is judging the nations and says, “whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did it for me.” The acts listed there are acts of kindness and mercy – gave food, water, shelter, clothing, cared for the sick and visited the imprisoned. There are no qualifiers

given to that list, but simply we had a choice to alleviate suffering. God's judgment in this parable is based on whether we took action or not to alleviate suffering by providing the basic needs of another.

When we are faced with the suffering of others it is tempting to look away, tempting to think someone else will meet the need. But our ability to stay with our discomfort or to be inconvenienced and lend aid is what makes us most merciful and compassionate. As individuals it can be hard to do it all and have an impact on the lives of others. Sure there are times when we will need to offer mercy to another directly and personally. But as a community of faith we can also share in the burden, pool resources and find ways of addressing these needs together and hopefully have a bigger impact.

Let us stretch our love for God and for our neighbor and extend mercy to all who need it, even when others say they don't deserve mercy. Let us be as merciful and loving as God has been loving and merciful toward us.