

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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Compassionate Disciples

Matthew 20:29-34

They had become fixtures in a landscape of suffering. In fact, most people didn't even look in their direction, much less respond to their cries for help. Their vision was gone, but their sense of hearing was sharp. They recognized the sound of an approaching crowd. So when Jesus, his disciples, and a bunch of other followers got within range of their voices, they pleaded as loud as they could. A shouting match ensued, with some in the crowd trying to silence them, so that Jesus could get on with more important business. But Jesus stopped. He did more than just slow down. He did more than just offer an empathetic glance while continuing his stride. He stopped. He stopped, and called to those who had called to him.

"What do you want me to do for you?" asked Jesus. "Lord," they answered, "we want our sight." Then our text says, "Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him" (vv. 32-34). According to Matthew, the route from what the blind men need to what Jesus gives passes through territory called compassion.

Compassion is one of the most frequently cited marks of Jesus' ministry. In fact, it's arguably the most common emotive term attributed to our Lord. It means to "have mercy" or "have pity." The term itself is a combination of *com*, meaning "with," and *passion*, meaning "suffering." In other words, to suffer together with or alongside others. To share in the sufferings of others. To enter into their sufferings with them.

The story in today's text is more than just a short account of a brief encounter between Jesus the roaming physician and two sick men who are made well. It's the story of the merciful Messiah who will soon begin the last part of his own journey into suffering and death, his own passion. And on the way to Jerusalem, the place of his own sorrow and pain, Jesus is still gathering followers who need to understand that being a disciple means cultivating compassion and being conformed to Jesus' cross-shaped life.

There are various ways to cultivate compassion. I recently came across news of a company called BeAnotherLab. They specialize in virtual reality technology. They've developed ways for users to experience embodiment, the cognitive illusion of being someone else. The company has come up with programs that allow you to do more than just swim with sharks or drive a race car or pilot a spacecraft. You can also use their VR to get a taste of adversity. You can experience what it's like to be a Sudanese refugee looking for asylum or to be someone who has a physical disability. In one example, the participant wearing a headset gets to see what it's like to be in a wheelchair, unable to move your legs, while trying to navigate city streets. As one journalist described the company's work, "VR shouldn't give you heaven, but hardship."¹

Of course, there are other ways to cultivate compassion. As the company's cofounder observed, "CGI works, but you don't need a machine to feel empathy. Just look the person in the face and talk with them."² This is the method we witness in today's Scripture passage, as Jesus halts his journey to Jerusalem and engages directly and personally with

the two blind men. To Jesus, these men are more than just case numbers or potentially satisfied clients. They're human beings whose afflictions and sufferings have led them to call upon the one whose mercy brings healing to the world. They recognize that Jesus is God's anointed one, sent to bring deliverance and restoration. And all this is possible because the Lord is compassionate toward us. Jesus lives into and lives out the name he was given at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel. He is Immanuel. He is God with us. And that includes with us in our sufferings.

If anyone was a candidate for compassion fatigue, surely it was Jesus. But here he is, after nearly three years of ministry, still embodying and exercising the mercy of God toward the brokenness and pain of the world. Still stopping to look. Still stopping to hear. Still stopping to speak. Still stopping to touch. Still stopping to heal. Still traveling on the way of the cross and making God's compassion visible to the people.

In his book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, sportswriter Mitch Albom describes his visits with a former professor who was dying of Lou Gehrig's disease. During one of their visits, Mitch asked Morrie why he bothered following the news since he wouldn't be around to see how things turned out anyway. Morrie said:

It's hard to explain, Mitch. Now that I'm suffering I feel closer to people who suffer than I ever did before. The other night on TV I saw people in Bosnia running across the street, getting fired on, killed, innocent victims, and I just started to cry. I feel their anguish as if it were my own. I don't know any of these people. But—how can I put this?—I'm almost drawn to them.³

I wonder if there was something about Jesus, especially as he moved closer to his own suffering and death, that drew him even closer to those who suffered. Those who couldn't see. Those who couldn't hear. Those who couldn't speak. Those who couldn't walk. Those who didn't know where their next meal was coming from. Those who had no place to sleep. Those who were abandoned. Those who were neglected or abused. Those whom society had marginalized or rejected. After all, it wouldn't be that long until he himself was abandoned, rejected, and killed. At every step along the way, the path of compassion had some of the cross in it.

The cross is where God's compassion for the world, his mercy toward humankind, his love for sinners, is fully and decisively revealed. The cross shows us that the Lord isn't a distant deity who lives untouched by our condition and circumstances. On the contrary, the Greek word for compassion is a strongly emotional word. No English term fully captures it. It takes a range of words to convey its meaning: compassion, mercy, pity, sympathy, fellow feeling. All these have to do with a gut response to someone's situation. We might say that when Jesus encountered someone's suffering, "his heart went out" to them. That might capture more of the emotional force of our Lord's reaction.

But remember that the Lord's compassion is more than just an emotive reaction to human lostness and suffering. That emotive response takes the form of concrete action. In today's text, "Jesus had compassion on them *and touched their eyes*" (v. 34a). So Jesus not only has sympathy for their need, but takes practical steps to meet that need. In fact, Matthew's summary of Jesus' response is almost like one single movement. "Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes." Jesus' concrete action isn't just the implementation of mercy. It's part of the mercy.

On April 19, 1995, a domestic terrorist truck bombing killed 168 people at the site of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. In the national memorial building on that site, 168 empty chairs remind us of where each person sat when he or she died.

Across the street is a statue of a tall, white-robed Christ. His back is to the busy street and the place where the federal building stood. The statue faces a brick wall where there are 168 empty spaces. Jesus stands with head bowed, one hand covering his face, and weeps. It's a vivid reminder of a compassionate Lord who suffers with the sufferers.

We need to hear again and again the truth that Jesus weeps with us. But we also need to hear that his tender mercy takes the tears, both ours and his, and moves them in the direction of healing. We need to know that Jesus not only suffers with us but also overcomes suffering. His compassion means more than just identifying with us and sympathizing with us. It also means taking action that rescues and restores us, so that somehow, pain and sorrow aren't the final word. That's what Jesus' life and ministry were all about. That's what the cross was all about.

And that's why he calls each of us to take up our own cross and follow him, embodying and exhibiting the compassion of God toward the world. In his book *The Spiritual Life of Children*, psychiatrist Robert Coles asked kids to draw pictures showing their feelings about God, and then to talk about them with him. Henrietta, a nine-year-old girl from Boston, drew a picture of Jesus healing a blind man. Coles asked her what she thought Jesus was saying and feeling when he did this healing. "Maybe Jesus sang while he healed," replied Henrietta.⁴ Earlier, she had said, "When Jesus saw someone in trouble, His heart skipped a beat." Then she went on to talk about how Jesus' walk matched his talk. "He'd mix with the people—I mean: He'd see someone, and he's stumbling and he might be blind, and Jesus could feel just the way the man felt, blind Himself, and He'd get right in there, try to get the man back to seeing."⁵

Henrietta's description of Jesus should also characterize we who are following him. If we're genuine disciples of Jesus, we'll be moved by the sufferings of others, and we'll get right in there to suffer with them. Now that doesn't mean we'll try to offer easy explanations for their circumstances, or that we'll offer quick, pain-free fixes. It simply means that the Lord will open our own eyes to see the afflictions and hardships of people who are right there along our path, and that he'll give us the compassion to move into action.

Feeling for someone is important. Having your heart go out them is good. But just feeling touched, without also specifically touching someone's need, isn't full and faithful discipleship. Pity alone, instead of pity practiced, won't necessarily give that person the comfort, resources, and hope that he or she needs in order to rise up and go forward toward a better day and a brighter future.

Return with me to Henrietta's depiction of Jesus healing a blind man. Henrietta talked some more about the picture she had drawn. She said, "I guess he touched the man's eye, and that made a big difference. He must have had the Lord inside him. If you do, then things can happen—I've heard people say so."⁶ The call to follow Jesus is a call to compassion, a call to a cross-shaped life. A life of having the Lord himself in you, so that his mercy can reach out to touch others.

¹ Charley Locke, "Maybe VR Shouldn't Give You Heaven—Maybe You Need Hardship." WIRED website. April 6, 2016. Accessed March 7, 2018 < <https://www.wired.com/2016/04/virtual-reality-beanootherlab/> >.

² Locke, "Maybe VR Shouldn't Give You Heaven—Maybe You Need Hardship."

³ <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2000/november/12694.html>.

⁴ Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990) 180.

⁵ Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, 178-79.

⁶ Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*, 179.