

Compassion is Not For Wimps Matt. 20:29-34; Col. 3:12 11/15/20

On Apr. 25, 2003 13 year-old Natalie Gilbert was singing the National Anthem at a nationally televised NBA playoff game. She stood alone at mid-court of Portland's Rose Garden Arena when her dream moment turned into a nightmare. Part way through the song, she forgot the words. Closing her eyes and shaking her head, she was on the verge of tears. At that moment, Maurice Cheeks, head coach of the Trailblazers, walked toward her, put his arm around her, and began singing with her. He encouraged the crowd to sing along and soon they all joined in, ending the song with a standing ovation.

What drove Maurice Cheeks, a former NBA Hall of Fame player, to step out on the court and come to the assistance of a 13 year-old girl, when he certainly wasn't a singer, and he wasn't sure he could remember the words himself? In a word- compassion. He felt for her in that awful moment and he took a risk to help her. Compassion isn't for wimps; It's an essential quality for leaders of all kinds and for everyday people. And it follows the example of Jesus.

In Matt. 20, we find a story from Jesus' ministry that demonstrates his compassion. Listen. ²⁹*As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him.* ³⁰*There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, "Lord, have mercy on*

us, Son of David!”³¹ The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet; but they shouted even more loudly, “Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!”³² Jesus stood still and called them, saying, “What do you want me to do for you?”³³ They said to him, “Lord, let our eyes be opened.”³⁴ Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him. (Matt. 20:29-34)

Jesus’ disciples, who had just finished an argument about which one of them was the greatest, left Jericho with Jesus, heading to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. As Jesus walked, he was probably teaching the crowd who walked along with him. Along the roadside were two blind men, labeled as beggars in the other gospels. They were probably hoping to get a generous response from these religious pilgrims! Then they heard that Jesus was there. Clearly, they knew about him, and had a high opinion of him, calling him “Son of David,” a title used for the Messiah! They called out to get his attention.

The crowd, trying to hear Jesus’ teaching, tried to shush them, but they wouldn’t be deterred. They shouted out louder and louder, begging Jesus for mercy. And Jesus stopped dead in his tracks to talk with them. He asked them what they wanted. Perhaps they just wanted a few coins to support themselves. But no, they had faith that Jesus could do the one thing that they most wanted- restore their sight! Keep in mind that in

ancient times those with disabilities had no real options in life. There was no “Israelites with Disabilities” Act, protecting their rights and their right to work. They were reduced to begging from others, a miserable way to live.

So Jesus, moved with compassion, touched their eyes, something that no one had likely done to them in a long time. And he healed them! It’s hard to imagine their great joy at this absolutely life-changing act! And then they followed him. Of course they followed him.

Frederick Buechner defined compassion as “the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it’s like to live inside somebody else’s skin. It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too.” Compassion is an issue of the heart, isn’t it? “Feeling what it’s like to live inside somebody else’s skin.” And it’s one of the ways that God calls his people to live.

I believe there are sparks of compassion in each of us which are remnants of the image of God in us. We see it sometimes in children who are willing to make great sacrifices to ease the pain of others, like when my four year-old daughter gave away “Bunkie,” her favorite blanket, to another little girl who was crying. That showed compassion. But our bent toward selfishness and self-centeredness can easily overcome any instincts toward compassion that are in us. When we allow selfishness to overwhelm our compassion, over time our souls shrink, as we see in

characters like Ebenezer Scrooge and the Grinch! Over time, those sparks of compassion simply die.

And sometimes, even those who have feelings of compassion can get overwhelmed with what is called “compassion fatigue.” We come to the realization that there is so much need in the world that we can’t possibly address it all, and we’re tempted to just stop caring! I’m intrigued that Jesus, who was regularly surrounded by demanding crowds of people wanting his help, didn’t ever seem to lose his compassion for others, although he did get frustrated with the Pharisees and even his own disciples at times! I believe Jesus’ deep well of compassion was replenished by his close relationship with his Father, a relationship that he nurtured by frequently getting away to pray. That may be a key to the secret of being a compassionate person- regularly nurturing a relationship with God, whose Spirit gives us compassion and love toward others.

And yet we have a role to play in this as well. On a Christmas Eve many years ago, I was busy setting up some things in the afternoon for the services that evening when Jonathan wandered in off the street looking for some money. My heart sank. I didn’t have time for this. We had helped Jonathan many times before, but it was never enough. He was an addict who could never seem to make life work. He had decent job skills, but could never hold a job long enough to find stability. I was tired from all the

Christmas preparations and tired of trying to help Jonathan without success. Honestly, I just wasn't feeling any compassion. I was ready to turn him away, when I remembered that Jesus had come that first Christmas to help folks like Jonathan, so out of a sense of duty, and since it was Christmas, I arranged some work for him to do at the church and offered to pay him for it. He was grateful, did the work, and I paid him.

Then I asked him if he had anywhere to go for Christmas, and, as I suspected, he said no. I checked in with Bonnie and invited him to spend the afternoon with our extended family the next day. He came and we enjoyed getting to know him better, and I think he enjoyed the time with our family. And I found myself feeling a sense of compassion toward Jonathan. We usually think that compassionate acts begin with feelings of compassion toward someone. But sometimes we just act out of a sense of duty, and the feelings of compassion come along later! Psychologists and philosophers call this praxis. And it works.

I think this is what Paul has in mind in the book of Colossians, when he says, "*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.* (Col. 3:12) It's the verse quoted on our Stewardship banner. In the previous verses, Paul tells them to "take off" sinful traits like impurity, greed, malice, slander, and lying. Now he tells them to "clothe themselves" with...compassion.

Sometimes, regardless of how we feel, we must put on character traits like compassion just because it's the right thing to do! And I think as we practice compassion, our hearts catch up and we begin to feel compassion for others! It becomes a kind of holy habit!

As we think about the GPC Compassion campaign, this is a good time to assess our CQ- our compassion quotient. How are we doing in using our time and talents in a compassionate way on behalf of others, especially those in need- be that financial, emotional, or spiritual need. I've been in conversation recently with some of our older members who are living in various local facilities. I've become aware that many of them are very lonely, having been isolated by this pandemic for over six months! These are people in need for whom we could act compassionately- calling them, sending a card or note, Face-timing with them. That's just one example. And if we desire to teach our children the virtue of compassion, we could involve them in compassionate practices like these, too.

In addition to sharing our time and talents, there is our money. Are we sharing our money with those in need, out of a sense of compassion? During the campaign we're asking you to assess how you're doing in that area, and then to make a compassion commitment for next year regarding your giving to GPC. Here, your giving goes to support a number of ministries of compassion both inside and outside our congregation. We

encourage you to prayerfully assess your current giving and then make a pledge to support this ministry in 2021. You'll have a chance to make your pledge in worship next week, either in person or electronically. I hope you'll do so.

Compassion is not for wimps. It requires discipline, self-sacrifice, and acting in faith. How is your Compassion Quotient?