

“LIVING COMPASSION”

Hosea 11:1-11; Colossians 3:12-17

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Sue Monk Kidd begins her essay called “Birthing Compassion” with a story told by Christopher de Vinck in his book *The Power of the Powerless*.

One spring afternoon my five-year-old son, David, and I were planting raspberry bushes along the side of the garage.... A neighbor joined us for a few moments.... David pointed to the ground....”Look Daddy! What’s that?” I stopped talking with my neighbor and looked down.

“A beetle,” I said.

David was impressed and pleased with the discovery of this fancy, colorful creature. My neighbor lifted his foot and stepped on the insect giving his shoe an extra twist in the dirt. “That ought to do it,” he laughed.

David looked at me, waiting for an explanation, a reason.... That night, just before I turned off the light in his bedroom, David whispered, “I liked that beetle, Daddy.”

“I did too,” I whispered back.

Kidd makes this comment about the story: “We have the power to choose how we will respond to every living thing that crosses our path, to all the fanciful, colorful creatures which God has set in motion upon our fragile planet, from beetles to human beings. Sometimes our feet are quicker than our hearts” (p.18).

A quick heart is no easy thing to maintain. It takes courage and perseverance. We’re being worn down by a culture of fear, by an overwhelming sense of need, and by our own stress and struggle to address our own needs. Despite holding “compassionate service” as a core value, we are challenged year after year to fill the slate of deacons. We always find good candidates, but the nominating committee will tell you that it isn’t always easy. The work of the deacons is vital to our health as a congregation, to our sense of community, and to our ministry of compassion.

Our deacons offer the practical supports during times of grief, maintain connections with our young people off at college. They minister to others in their illness and join in taking the sacrament to our shut-ins. They coordinate rides, send birthday greetings, and pray. When the funeral receptions stack up and the prayer list grows longer, they have every reason to grow weary. Usually caring comes naturally but sometimes it’s work.

Beyond the walls of the church, we are sometimes worn down by the unresolved problems in families and society. There are just as many children in poverty as there were twenty years ago. The numbers of the hungry are not declining. Agencies that serve the homeless, that offer relief to the victims of violence, that treat addiction, and

that advocate for justice continue to be strapped for resources. Caring is hard. Compassion is elusive.

Bryan Stevenson founded the Equal Justice Initiative about 30 years ago. He began by offering free legal counsel to those on death row who could not afford a lawyer. The fact that this is just about everyone should make us pause and wonder about the fairness of sentencing practices in our judicial system. His story and the stories of those who fought for are told in the book, *Just Mercy*. He had a lot of successes, but I was particularly moved by one of his losses. As he talks on the phone with Jimmy Dill on the night of his execution, Bryan considers walking away from the job. He writes:

When I hung up the phone that night I had a wet face and broken heart. The lack of compassion I witnessed every day had finally exhausted me. I looked around my crowded office, at the stacks of records and papers, each pile filled with tragic stories, and I suddenly didn't want to be surrounded by all this anguish and misery....

For the first time I realized that my life was just full of brokenness. I worked in a broken system of justice. My clients were broken by mental illness, poverty, and racism (p.288).

Stevenson discovers a reason to keep at it in this idea of brokenness. He goes to write:

After working for more than twenty-five years, I understood that I don't do what I do because it's required or necessary or important. I don't do it because I have no choice

I do what I do because I'm broken too....

We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent....

... our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis for our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing. Our shared vulnerability and imperfection nurtures and sustains our capacity for compassion (p. 289).

Compassion means literally to "feel with." Our ability to feel another's pain presumes that we have known pain ourselves. We see our pain in the other person and so are able to reach out in compassion. As Stevenson points out, it's not always pain on the same level, but their pain sparks the memory of our pain and thus connects us.

This is precisely what's going on in the reading from Hosea. We are told first of God's love for Israel in very tender terms. Then we are told of Israel's rejection of God. Then we see God's pain expressed in the form of anger as God considers returning them to Egypt. And finally, we read some of the most heart-warming words of the Old Testament: "How can I give you up Ephraim?... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath."

I imagine God's experience of rejection, being the very thing that leads God to reject the formula of "an eye for an eye." Knowing rejection is the very thing that brings the loving God to refuse to visit that experience on God's children. The wrath that many associate with the God of the Old Testament is not what lies at the core of God's being. The prophet Hosea cuts through the anger and anguish of God to reveal God's compassion. He exposes God's brokenness through which we are bound to the creator. God's compassion holds us even in the midst of our pain.

Isn't this the story of Jesus as well? God-with-us? Becoming flesh and dwelling among us, sharing our joy and sorrow? Doesn't Jesus persist in the face of our rejection to continue to love us, to endure the brokenness of his body rather than lifting a finger to harm us? Time and time again, Jesus looks upon the crowd and upon his disciples with compassion. He models the way of discipleship and it centers on compassion.

It's no mistake that the first instruction that Paul gives to those who would be people of God is "to clothe yourselves with compassion." Bryan Stephenson saw compassion as the center of our common humanity. To feel with and for one another is the bread that nurtures our determination to do the work of healing. To be a follower of Jesus is not an intellectual exercise. It is a work of the heart.

We do live in a culture that would have us box up our feelings, to cover up our vulnerability, to be self-sufficient. But the truth is that this program won't even make us human, and it certainly won't help us to become the children of God.

There may be days when as a deacon you will be tempted to close the door on caring too much. There are days for all of us when we just want to shut the world out. There are still days, I imagine, when God would just as soon send us back to Egypt. But God doesn't. Because the path to love, to a lasting sense of peace and wholeness, always passes through compassion.

Remember always, God loves you, God loves you, God loves you. And by the way, so does your deacon along with the rest of your church family. Amen.

Resources:

Kidd, Sue Monk. "Birthing Compassion" in *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*. November/December 1990. [The whole issue is on compassion].

Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. Spiegel & Grau: New York, 2014.

Other works on compassion:

Nouwen, Henri J.M. *The Wounded Healer* Image Books: Garden City, NY, 1979.

Semmelroth, Carl. *The Compassion Switch*. self-published, 2015.