

Having Compassion ~ July 26, 2009

John 6:1-21

Has anyone ever told you that a friend or acquaintance, was “too needy” for them to handle? I hear this comment from time to time and I understand the feelings that are being expressed. There are times when people can simply drain us of all the energy and good vibes we might have going for us. Sometimes the person who is “too needy” has been a longtime friend who has fallen on hard times and the only conversation we can have with him or her is about how difficult life has become. We find ourselves being dragged down into some human need we do not want to encounter and so we simply spend less and less time with the person.

I was talking to a colleague just the other day who had been to lunch with one of her congregants. She wasn't sure what this person wanted to talk about before their meeting and was totally surprised at the turn of the conversation. She told me that he had spoken with great passion to her but something was not quite right. Later she decided that his passion was directed in a very negative direction and she saw, for the first time, that this was simply the man's M.O. He was only passionate about things that were negative, never was he able to accentuate the positive. I knew when she called me that she just needed a sounding board, someone to listen and reflect back what was heard so that some sense could be made of the situation. I often have compassion for my fellow pastors because, having been around for a while, I have certainly been where they are at times and done what they are doing or trying to do while encountering many of the interesting personalities they have pop up in their churches.

Compassion means that we have the ability to “suffer with” someone. We can discover just where they are in life and spend time walking with them for a while. Very often we can offer another person compassion without ever having suffered the same thing they have, the loss of a child, the break-up of a relationship, the struggle with a disease. We can be present and uphold them and walk with them right where they are.

Jesus meant to teach his disciples the way of compassion for others. In our scripture reading for last week we saw Jesus having compassion for his disciples after they had spent time, with little to no rest or food, ministering to others. In his own exhaustion he understood the need they had to withdraw from those around them and find a little time and space for themselves. So, he sent them away to a distant lonely shore to recover after feeding a large crowd that had followed.

This week in the gospel of John we find another story of the feeding of the multitude; that story of the wonderful miracle of sharing.

But, we need to see that not only were those people in the story sharing with one another, they were discovering the very basis, the roots, of compassion. One person might have had a basket full of food while the person sitting beside him or her had none. Compassion, an understanding of being hungry, would enter in as one turned to another and offered what it was they had to share.

Compassion often stopped Jesus in his footsteps as he went from one place to another. Someone might ask for a healing for a child, another might simply slip up on him and touch the hem of his robe, another might extend limbs that were crippled, and another

might show him a face being eaten by leprosy. In all the stories we have of him, he never turned away and just kept on walking because someone seemed to him “too needy.” Instead he would have compassion and do whatever it took to bring that person to physical or spiritual wholeness.

We need to grasp that his mission was to bring people to a closer walk with God and a better understanding of their spirituality. That is most likely why he often told people to keep their physical healings a secret—he did not want to be consumed by the physical when he knew there was so much more to life. He understood that people could handle almost anything life had dealt them if they had a sustaining faith in a God who loves them and who wants them to become the very best they can be. The essence of Jesus’ mission was to demonstrate this love and compassion of God. It was to reveal to all who could and would understand the nature of God as he did.

We all know that we are to share the love of God with one another. We are also to share the compassion of God in the same way. Our lives are very full and we are tugged in one direction after another—kept too busy to see the pain that is all around us or, at times, too busy to want to see and acknowledge it. But it’s there whether we choose to see it or not. It’s there tugging at us, asking us to help, asking us to share a bit of time. It’s there in the faces of friends and strangers, in the eyes of the homeless, the abused, those who have lost hope, in the desperation of people without jobs, those suffering from an illness. If we take the time to stop and consider the world around us, we cannot avoid seeing people who need us to take some time and walk a bit with them—to have some measure of compassion and not judgment. We are often too quick to look at others and determine who is worthy and who is not. That’s not our job. Our job, as Christians, is to exhibit the love, kindness, caring and compassion of our teacher to those who look to us for a word or touch of comfort and care. It is our job to humbly, without fanfare, reach out a hand of love and concern and to help others find their feet again. The spirit that dwells within us needs to reach out to the spirit that lives within us all to provide pathways back to wholeness for those who have been shattered.

The choice is always ours to do so or not. Be certain to choose wisely. Amen