

Jan. 31, 2010

Fifth Sunday of Epiphany

Title: School of Compassion

Hebrew Scriptures, Psalm: Hope in the Lord. Psalm 71:106

New Testament, Gospel: Jesus is rejected by his hometown. Luke 4:21-30

Prayer: May God bless us in our sleep and rest, in our dreams with vision, in our waking with a calm mind, in our soul with the friendship of the Holy Spirit this day and every day.
Amen.

When I was a teenager I was enthralled by the world wide adventures of Margaret Meed. As an anthropologist she would go to exotic places studying the culture and customs of people past and present. From all of her studies and gathered knowledge she was asked what she regarded as the earliest sign of civilization. Was it an axe-blade, an arrowhead, a fishhook, or something more sophisticated, such as a musical instrument or a ceramic bowl? "No, none of those things," she said. "it is - a healed human leg bone. Not something made by a human, but something human; not an artifact, but a part of someone who once lived and walked this earth, who was hurt but healed."

She went on to explain that where the law of the survival of the fittest reigns, a broken leg means certain death - when you cannot make it on your own, when you can not keep up with the tribe, you're doomed. But a healed leg bone is physical evidence that someone cared. Someone gathered food for that injured person until their leg was healed; someone cared for them until they could, once again, care for themselves.

The first sign of civilization was compassion.

And here, all along, I always held Compassion out there as the culmination of civilization - not the beginning. This turns my whole world of who we are and where we are going inside out. I have been looking in the wrong direction. What I saw as the ultimate end goal of the human family turns out to be the very first baby steps of what it means to be a human being. Some 6.5 million years ago we began to evolve away from our closest relative, the chimpanzee. And it was only 2-300,000 years ago that the human species as we know ourselves to be today emerged. Around this time we were identified as having a human heart, a heart of compassion. Evolution of the species is a really slow process, but isn't it fascinating, mysterious and awesome. A witness to the 'handy work' of the Spirit of a loving God.

I've never studied anthropology and what I know about animal behavior I mostly learned from the National Geographic magazine. We do know that animals care for their young, that some stay in groups where relationships are formed. Some animals, like the elephants, mourn the death of a baby elephant. But how does an animal wrap a broken leg so it can heal, gather food

and bring some back to share with the wounded, or stay with the wounded even when the rest of the group has left because of danger coming. Compassion - I will stand by you. I will take care of you. I will give up my own comfort and safety for you. I will suffer hunger, ambush and my own life for you. I don't know if animals demonstrate this attribute of compassion, but humans have been doing this since the very beginning of our species. (Is this a God-given gift given to us human beings? I wonder. I hope so.)

In the beginning people showed compassion. Come to find out, from the beginning compassion is the building block that holds relationships together and builds community. Just think of it - compassion is already there, in your heart, in your mind and in your soul. You don't have to go looking for it, you don't have to close your eyes and wish you had a bunch more. As a human being, you've got it.

Compassion is that inner force that moves us to action. And what a huge amount of compassion-in-action we have seen these past few weeks pouring out to Haiti. Your generous giving of \$1,050 on just two Sundays - this is amazing. The Red Cross receiving over \$5 million via text messages alone and over \$50 million in donations. Oxfam America, an organization that fights poverty and hunger around the world, has had such a response that over 11,000 new people have actually joined the organization making a long term commitment to giving. The whole world is giving money, supplies, goods, and also sending rescue crews, doctors, nurses, tent builders and road repair crews.

On the world scene, would you believe, Saudi Arabia is the third largest giver to Haiti. We don't hear much about Muslim countries in the way of compassion and giving a helping hand to strangers, foreigners - people of other religions, other races. Yet, here they are, a Muslim country that we doubt, making the intentional decision to help people who are totally different than themselves. They don't have to do this. Compassion can catch you by surprise like that, enlarging the circle of friendship and building bridges between communities.

Even more astonishing is the report of the poor African country, the Republic of Zambia and their generous giving to Haiti. According to the World Bank, 55% of the population of Zambia live on \$2 a day. The per capita income is \$1,150 per year.

Poverty and AIDS is crippling this struggling nation, yet they are giving to others way beyond their calculated 'fair share.' "Why are they doing this? They should be using their resources to help themselves. This isn't a logical thing to do. It doesn't make sense." Then how do we explain their giving - the poorest of the poor giving large amounts of money and services to a group of people they don't know who live on the other side of the globe. What could possibly be their motivation, other than compassion?

Jesus did the same thing - holding up compassion when it wasn't the logical thing to do. From the passage we heard this morning, Jesus is giving the first sermon of his ministry to his hometown neighbors and friends. He has just finished reading the scriptures from the book of Isaiah: "The spirit has chosen me to bring good news to the poor, return sight to the blind and set

free the oppressed.” Now, like any good preacher, he tells two stories that illuminate the text. One is the story of the prophet Elijah who provides food to the foreign widow during a great famine. She’s from another country, worships another god, and is loyal to another form of government. Nothing like the neighbors and friends he is talking to. The second story is about the prophet Elisha healing the skin disease of the army general Naaman who happened to be the leader of the Syrian enemy army.

The people at the worship service who heard this didn’t like the idea of compassion spreading out beyond their community, beyond their religion, beyond their control. What kind of a person would preach such a thing? It is obvious, they said to each other, he isn’t loyal to his people or to his country. We must stop such dangerous talk. Let’s push him over the edge of the cliff and get rid of him.

Jesus, being a smart fellow, gets the message and gets out of town. As he leaves town wondering where to go and who will listen to him, we can hear him praying the words of the psalm we heard this morning, “You have been by my side in the past; but, this time, in the mess I am in now, are you with me Lord?” Jesus never gives up on compassion as the foundation of human life and this is what he died for.

Compassion is like that - it starts out small and then grows bigger and bigger. When we follow the path of compassion it changes the way we treat others, the way we think about others, and the way we pray for folks we never included in our prayers before.

The modern Christian writer, Frederick Buechner, describes the all inclusive, not to leave anyone behind, nature of compassion. He writes: “Compassion is 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.”

So it is, compassion drives the action of how we love our neighbors. Just take the most famous and most demanding statement in our constitution - that all (people) are created equal. Compassion was the fertile ground of this big idea. From it grew the process of befriending and drawing into the family circle black Americans, women, children, immigrants and now gays and lesbians. It is this same foundation of compassion to improve the life of all people that drives our social security system, and medicare. And today, it is compassion that drives health care reform. Let us not get confused by the cries of ‘too much government, too little money, too socialistic’ by those against health care reform. These are not the real issues. What is at risk is our breadth and width and height of compassion for those who don’t have and can’t afford health care.

Compassion isn’t a sweet gentle breeze that feels good. It isn’t a nice idea printed on the page of a book, or just a gentle act of kindness. Instead, compassion takes us to the edge where there are risks, and hope and courage.

What's the role of the church in the call for compassion? I like to think of our church as a School of Compassion. You can go to a school of education, a school of nursing, a business school or cooking school. But, when you come here let it be know that you are signing on to the School of Compassion. Here, we believe compassion is what makes us human. It is within each one of us, ready to be nurtured and cultivated, promoted and strengthened. For us compassion is more than our mission trips, our community outreach and our extravagant welcoming. Here we expect to practice compassion in our church school and youth group, at our meetings and planning sessions, in our prayers and the songs we sing.

As we practice compassion in all its forms, let us remember - Compassion isn't a logical thing to follow. Sometime it doesn't seem to make sense. And, as Jesus shows us, it can get us into trouble with our friends and neighbors, with the laws of the land and sometimes with family members. And yet, compassion is the driving force of all that we do here at church. Compassion is the heart and soul of all that we dream of becoming. Amen.