

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, September 6, 2015
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Compassionate Doing

Last week I concluded my sermon emphasizing the message from the Letter of James that calls us to be doers of the word rather than hearers only. Today I am emphasizing that God not only calls us to be doers of the word, God calls us to “Compassionate Doing”.

Commentator Kathryn Matthews (Huey) says, “*In recent weeks, we’ve heard the letters of the early church reminding us that what we do and how we go about our lives are the sure signs of our being followers of Jesus. Our words, our right doctrines, and our self-image as “good Christians” can’t define us as Jesus’ faithful disciples if we neglect the heart of the law of compassion and love.*”¹ How might our individual lives and the life of this community be changed if we governed ourselves by the law of compassion and love?

Let us begin by looking at our Old Testament readings from Proverbs. It begins by speaking to a concern that has plagued humankind throughout history. The concern is the disparity between the rich and the poor. Proverbs 22, verses 1 and 2 reads: “*The wealthy and the poor share a common bond: God is the creator of us all.*”

Biblical Commentator, Susan T. Henry-Crowe, says, “*In contemporary culture in the United States, much of our language reflects categories of identity that connote “otherness”: “the poor,” “immigrants,” “gays and lesbians,” “rednecks,” “men,” and “women.” Proverbs 22 says, “The Lord is the maker of them all.” In a theology of equality pejorative labels of suspicion about otherness are morally and ethically wrong. Thinking and acting that result in unjust treatment of others leads to calamity. Justice and care result in blessing.*” She concludes with these words: “*This section of Proverbs is a call not to betray the family of God.*”²

As we look deeper into how we might engage more fully in “Compassionate Doing” let us remember the importance of seeing all people of the world as part of the family of God. Thereby, let us seek to embrace one another for the sameness we find in God rather than to prejudge or even to categorize people as other than ourselves. Not an easy task, but one made easier as we hear from Proverbs: “*God is the creator of us all.*”

Today’s gospel text from Mark contains two healing stories. They occur in Gentile territory. In the first story we are told that a Gentile of Syrophenician origin begged Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. Jesus’ initial response to this woman shocks us today. Referring to the Gentiles as dogs, Jesus said,

“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the

¹ http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_september_6_2015

² Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Proverbs 17-Reign of Christ).

dogs." (Mark 7:27) I find it difficult to imagine Jesus saying these words. Yet, I also find it reassuring somehow, since these words of judgment of the other clearly place Jesus as a fully human person – maybe more like us. Commentator Kathryn Matthews (Huey) adds, *"Our discomfort with Jesus' humanity and his very real experience and perspective as one who grew up and lived in a specific cultural context, trips us up on this exchange, even though things turn out well in the end."*³

We do need to understand the context of the times both in which Jesus lived and the times in which the Gospel of Mark were written. Some biblical scholars emphasize that what Jesus said would not have been shocking particularly to the early Christian community. Other scholars emphasize that the critical aspect of this story was that Jesus was willing to change his mind; that Jesus was able to overcome the cultural context in which he was living; that even when dealing with the human reality of fatigue and so clearly trying to get away from the crowds and those seeking healing, he was eventually able to hear her words: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he was able to respond compassionately and say, "For saying that, you may go - the demon has left your daughter."

In the second healing story from Mark, we also have some unique aspects. Jesus was again traveling when people brought to him "a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech". The scriptures tells us that in this instance he took deaf man aside in private and healed him by speaking the word "Ephphatha," (*pronounced ef'-a-tha*) which means, "Be opened." When the man could hear and could speak without impediment, Jesus ordered them to tell no one. Yet, we are told, the more he ordered them to tell no one, the more zealously they proclaimed it. For our purposes today, I think it is important to recognize that even when Jesus was not seeking to prove who he was, or to increase the number of his followers, he could do nothing other than to show compassion for those in need. Whether or not Jesus fully intended to extend his ministry to the Gentile world, he extended his compassion and healing to them.

Let us now explore other aspects of living under the law of compassion and love. The dictionary defines compassion simply as a concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others. I want us to consider expanding that definition in two ways. One way of expanding the definition of compassion is by using the phrase "Compassionate Doing" – combining our concern with our actions. A second way of expanding compassion is found in the writings of Henri Nouwen. Lets first look a little deeper into what I mean in using the term "Compassionate Doing" and then we will look at Nouwen's writings.

"Compassionate Doing" takes us beyond feeling concern for the misfortunes of others and into doing something to alleviate those misfortunes. Being doers of the word and not hearers, yes, but doers of the word compassionately. A simple yet powerful way of "Compassionate Doing" is by sharing our financial resources with others in need. At Edina Morningside Church, this includes the benevolences supported by our loose change offerings, our budgeted gifts to Our Churches Wider Mission and per capita giving to the Minnesota Conference UCC; our special offerings to other UCC funds or special requests

^{3 3} http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_september_6_2015

such as when disaster strikes parts of the world; and other special mission and outreach giving. We also donate supplies for those in need to Volunteers Enlisted to Assist People (VEAP). Other than offering our financial resources and supplies, many in this faith community, are very faithful in offering time to Loaves and Fishes. Our Board of Christian Education also have recently been engaging us in new partnerships on the North Side of Minneapolis where even spending our money in that community for food we enjoy, is an important form of "Compassionate Doing". Thanks be to God for all these gifts and others which I may not have named. Proverbs 22, verse 9 says, "*A blessing comes to the generous when they give of their bounty to the poor.*" I believe that all of us know that experience of feeling blessed by the giving of these gifts.

Finally, I wish to turn to the writings of Henri Nouwen, where he equates compassion with caring. Henri Nouwen was an author, a Catholic Priest and one of my professors at Yale Divinity School in the field of Pastoral Theology. In a meditation on "Care", he writes, "*The basic meaning of care is: to grieve, to experience sorrow, to cry out with.*" Nouwen continues, "*...we tend to look at caring as an attitude of the strong toward the weak, of the powerful toward the powerless, of the have's toward the have-not's. And, in fact, we feel quite uncomfortable with an invitation to enter into someone's pain before doing something about it.*"⁴

Nouwen's definition of caring adds another dimension to "Compassionate Doing". It suggests more than providing financial resources, or providing our time or providing needed supplies. It suggests not only that "Compassionate Doing" requires being in relationship with the person in need, it also suggests that we not be detached and set apart, but actually enter into someone's pain, experience their sorrow and to cry out with those who cry out in distress. How might our ministries at Edina Morningside Church be different if we sought to add more of this dimension of "Compassionate Doing"? I believe that God is calling us to be so moved by the circumstances of those in need that we can no longer tolerate allowing the injustice to continue. God is calling us to the realization that the pain of the other is our pain, that their grief is our grief, their sorrow is our sorrow, that when they cry out in distress, we also must cry out in distress. God is the creator of us all. We are all part of God's family. May it be so. Amen.

⁴ Out of Solitude, Three Meditations on the Christian Life by Henri J. M. Nouwen; © 1974, Ava Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana 46556. Page 34