

Luke 13: 10-17
Giving Compassion a Chance
First Presbyterian Church
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Some people dream really big dreams. Several years ago while I was serving on the Council of the Presbytery of Denver Jim Simons had a really big dream. Jim was at that time the Associate Pastor of Columbine United Church out in Littleton. Three denominations sponsor the Columbine church and we are one of them. Jim dreamed of a conference in Denver that would kick off a “Year of Compassion”. He dreamed that the conference would feature the Dali Lama and the Pope along with other religious leaders from around the world. Jim’s dream was that the major religions of the world would come together and for one year work together in acts of compassion for the world. And what drove Jim’s dream was that regardless of the things that divide the world’s religions the one quality we all have in common is compassion. Compassion is a core value of all the world’s major religions. Unfortunately, even though he did much praying and much planning and raised a fair amount of money his dream died before it could live.

Compassion is not a uniquely Christian value but it was part of who Jesus was and it is a quality he urges on those who follow him. And our text for this morning is a story of the compassion of Jesus. It is only one of such stories that come from the ministry of Jesus.

Jesus and his disciples are making their way to Jerusalem to observe the Passover. Luke takes 10 of the 24 chapters of his Gospel to tell us about the journey to Jerusalem. It is an actual journey but it is also symbolic of the journey of faith that each of us assumes when we are touched by the love of

God through Christ. Luke does not tell us where this incident happened or at what point along the way. He does tell us it was the Sabbath and Jesus was teaching in a synagogue along the route. It is the last time Jesus will teach in a synagogue before the events of Jerusalem spin out of control.

As the visiting rabbi Jesus is accorded the honor of reading and commenting on the Scripture for the day. It was the same procedure which started his ministry in Nazareth. And while he is talking he notices from the corner of his eye a small disturbance taking place at the back of the room. Unlike our custom, people in the synagogue stood for the teaching and the rabbi sat. People are moving and shuffling in one spot. Jesus tries not to notice and concentrates all the more on what he is saying. Then just as he turns his head he catches sight of her. A woman has emerged from the back of the crowd. People have let her through and even helped her find her way. It is not unusual for a woman to be part of the worshipping community in the synagogue but this woman is unique and she catches the attention of Jesus immediately. She cannot stand up straight. In fact, she is bent over from the waist so that her eyes are almost always on the floor in front of her. She can barely make her way without assistance. She shuffles along and it's clear that her legs don't work the way they are supposed to. Much of her weight is supported by a cane and her body is twisted and misshapen because of her condition.

So often when we read the stories about Jesus we see people who are trying to get a look at him, people who come to him with requests, people who choose to follow him. We see Jesus from the perspective of the crowd. We are in their shoes looking at him. But we do not often stop to consider what Jesus saw when he looked at the people around him. What was he thinking as he saw the faces and the conditions of those who were waiting to

see or hear him? Luke doesn't tell us what Jesus thought about this woman. He doesn't have to. It becomes evident. Jesus is touched by the infirmity that has robbed this woman of a normal and happy life. He feels sorry for her. His heart goes out to her. But it goes farther than that.

You see compassion isn't the same as feeling sorry for someone or feeling pity for them. To feel sympathy or pity is to experience a certain kind of emotion. But compassion goes beyond feelings. Compassion enters into the suffering of another. Compassion shares the pain as though it were one's own. Compassion always takes action. Compassion reaches out to help, support, or heal. And Jesus reaches out to this woman with compassion. His teaching comes to a standstill. All activity ceases. Her well being is more important. And I think we can go so far as to say that everything the synagogue stood for was symbolized in the encounter of Jesus and this unnamed woman. His healing of her lived out whatever he was teaching at the moment.

What do you suppose Jesus sees when he looks at us? Us individually and us as a congregation? Does he see people who are able to stand on their own two feet and walk the journey without any difficulty? Does he see people who have no trouble standing straight and tall? Does he see people who are without weighty burdens? Does he see people who would never think of asking for help? Because that's how we want to appear. That's the front we work hard to maintain and present to others on Sunday morning. That may even be how we see ourselves. But is it what Jesus sees?

My suspicion is that when Jesus sees us he is moved with compassion. He sees all the ways in which life has crippled us. He sees how difficult it is for us to make it from one day to the next. He sees the burdens which bend us over and keep our eyes on the ground. He sees the pain that distorts our

features and our hearts. He sees all the ways in which the joy of life has been lost. And he is moved with compassion. He enters into our pain assuming it as his own. And then he says to each of us as he did to that woman, “You are set free”.

The leader of the synagogue was not happy. The whole service had been interrupted. People were out of control. Healing had no place in the synagogue. It could happen at other places and other times but this time was set aside for teaching and for prayer. Looking back at him over 20 centuries of time we can see how rigid he was. And we can see that he was so blind he couldn't see the kingdom of God when it was right in front of his face. When what all the teaching pointed to was actually happening he could only complain. And I suppose he would be funny if he didn't look a lot like us.

Once upon a time the church we belonged to entered into a program of compassion. It decided to host a preschool for the underprivileged children of the neighborhood. The children came to school dirty and often hungry. They hadn't been taught many manners and they knew nothing about school or the church. But the program was helping them stand up straight and be free of the bondage of poverty and neglect. The children were so happy. But the members of the church complained because their space was now filled with the things of the school. They complained because the basement smelled. They complained because the children weren't polite. They complained because the basement couldn't be used for other daytime gatherings. They complained because the children didn't come to church.

We get very concerned about the programs of the church and we get upset when church isn't conducted the way we think it should be but is the compassion Jesus demonstrated lived out in what we do? Do we come

together on Sunday to celebrate the healings that have taken place in our midst or simply to hear about the healings recorded in the Bible? Do we look with pity on those who are struggling or are we willing to enter into their pain and make it our own? Do we give God praise for being able to stand up straight in our faith and take the steps of the faith journey, or do we take credit for the faith we have? Is it clear to us that life is the laboratory where what we study and hear here is lived out?

Jim Simons dream didn't come true. The preschool was eventually closed and the church moved to a 'better' neighborhood. And Jesus went on to Jerusalem where his compassion was sentenced to die an ugly death. How can compassion be the core value of the world's religions when we don't give compassion a chance?

Let us pray.