

## **Compassion is not just a feeling. It's a decision to get involved.**

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab*

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It seems as if every time I turn on the TV or pick up a newspaper, I learn about another tragic disaster, another population left homeless and destitute, another ten thousand injured and thousands more dead. Every day we get requests to donate money to truly worthwhile causes: feeding the hungry, caring for orphans, curing terrible diseases, educating poor girls in backwards regions of the Third World where girls don't get sent to school, housing the homeless, and so on.

*Compassion* is a moral imperative for all the world's great religions. But being constantly bombarded with news about the plight of poor, suffering people causes some of us to experience "compassion fatigue." We don't want to hear about one more tragedy or one more disaster. We don't want to see one more picture of a starving child. The endless deluge of sad news can leave us numb. The needs of the world are so numerous and so great, and our personal resources are so obviously limited, that we can develop emotional detachment from further tragedies. We say, *"There's another earthquake in China, and another flood in Bangladesh, and another civil war in central Africa. —What can I really DO about it? I'm sorry, but I have my own worries to deal with, so please leave me alone."*

Let's consider Jesus. Wherever Jesus went, he drew a crowd. Some people adored him and wanted to be near him. Others despised him and wanted to heckle him. And there were many others who were just curious about him. But in addition to the devoted, the hostile, and the curious, there were the needy. Hundreds of sick, leprous, deaf, blind, or lame people flocked to him everywhere he went, begging him for healing. It was so exhausting, there were times he had to escape to the hills and be alone.

One day when Jesus and his entourage of disciples, admirers, critics and needy people came to the little town in southern Galilee called Nain, they were met by another crowd of people going the other way, heading out the town gate. This was a funeral procession.

Now, Jesus and the others might simply have stopped and stood quietly at the roadside to let the funeral procession go by, on its way out to the tomb – just the way we do on the highway when a hearse comes along, driving slowly, followed by a line of cars with their lights on. That's probably what most of the people around him did —but not Jesus.

Jesus watched the funeral procession. The body of the deceased was being carried out on a bier, as was the custom with the poor. There was no coffin; the corpse was wrapped in a shroud and laid on a wooden plank. Following the body there came a weeping woman – dressed in the customary garb of a widow. Burials always took place on the day of the death, so the woman was in the anguish of fresh grief. She was leaning on a couple of other women and surrounded by sympathetic friends. Jesus saw no young people or children with her, and so he knew right away that this was a mother taking out the body of her only son for burial.

Luke says that when Jesus saw this brokenhearted, bereaved mother, *"he had compassion for her."* In spite of his being assailed continuously, every day, by pitiful people in need of help, he was not numb to the situation. The original language is more graphic; it literally says *"he was moved with gut-wrenching feeling for her."* That tells us something important about *compassion*. It always "hits us in the gut." It's an internal yearning, a deep empathy for people which is so intense it affects us physically. Authentic compassion begins, first of all, with feelings we can't freeze out.

Jesus called out, maybe from the roadside, to the poor woman and said, *“Oh, please don’t cry!”* (What could be more “gut-wrenching” than to hear the cries of a mother who has just experienced such a loss?)

Jesus went over and stopped the procession. He put his hand on the bier and said simply, *“Young man, I say to you, be raised.”* The man immediately sat up, alive, and began to speak. Luke says that Jesus *“gave him back to his mother.”* The villagers were awe-struck. With their own eyes they had just seen the power of God at work, just as in the days of Elijah. And they ran to spread news of the miracle far and wide. We’re not told anything else: not about anyone coming to faith, not about the woman or the boy being grateful to Jesus. Nothing else, only this: *“He gave him back to his mother.”*

Jesus’ *compassion* for the grieving mother is the first thing the gospel-writer mentions, and it’s the main point of the story. He was *“deeply moved with gut-wrenching feeling”* when he saw her tears, when he recognized her loneliness and sensed her anxiety for the future. A widow who had no son to be her protector was at risk in that ancient society. The woman probably had no idea who Jesus was, and the other people from Nain were as much in the dark as she was. They might have heard about a miracle-working prophet named Jesus of Nazareth, but they could have had no idea that this man was he. Certainly the weeping woman had no faith, no expectation that some stranger at the roadside could help her. She was absorbed in her own pain. —But Jesus felt compassion for her.

*Compassion* is a powerful emotion, but it’s more than that. All the great religions describe *compassion* as one of the main attributes of God and as a quality found in holy people. But how do you and I acquire compassion? Can we *learn* compassion? I’ve never seen an advertisement for an educational video entitled *“Six Weeks to a More Compassionate Me.”* I’ve never read a “how-to” book on compassion.

Compassion is a gift. I believe that. Faith is a gift, too. But just as there are some things we can do to deepen our faith, I believe that there are some things we can do to deepen our natural capacity to experience and practice compassion. Here are three steps we can take.

***The first step is to decide to BECOME MORE SENSITIVE TO OTHER PEOPLE.*** I got this lesson when I was a senior in high school and was the editor of our high school paper. The journalism teacher who was the sponsor for the student paper said to me every day, over and over, “Bruce, you have to be sensitive to other people’s feelings. Be sensitive to other people.” Obviously, I must have been a typical adolescent, totally wrapped up in myself!

What we have to do is stop, and look around; take notice of others. Look them in the eye. We’re often oblivious to what’s really going on with our friends, much less with strangers. We keep wrapped up in ourselves, our ambitions, and our emotions. We don’t always notice others’ sadness; we don’t perceive their pain. Or, if we do notice, we don’t want to let it “get to us” because we think there’s really nothing we can do to help. Besides that, we don’t want to be intrusive. We want to respect their privacy. So we pat them on the back and go on about our business. —But compassion demands that we *allow ourselves be emotionally vulnerable*, that we share the other person’s pain so much that we are inwardly moved, just as Jesus was.

***That leads to the second step, which is a decision to ACT ON OUR FEELINGS.*** Compassion is more than just “feeling sorry” for people. It requires that we get involved, that we *do whatever we CAN do to help*. Emotions come and go. But compassion, like faith, also involves an act of the will: the decision to *get personally engaged with the other person*. Peter Ustinov once said, *“Charity is more common than*

*compassion. Charity is tax-deductible. Compassion is time-consuming.*” Many bystanders were probably moved to tears as they watched the weeping mother following the body of her only son to his tomb. But Jesus didn’t just weep, he didn’t *just* have feelings; he *did* something. He got personally involved.

***The third step in this process of growing our own capacity for compassion is to BECOME FULLY AWARE OF OUR RESOURCES AND UNDERSTAND WHAT WE CAN PERSONALLY BRING TO BEAR WHEN WE DECIDE TO GET INVOLVED.*** After the South Asian tsunami in December 2004, there was a story in NEWSWEEK about Rebecca O'Connor, a pediatric nurse in New York City. Seeing the reports of the terrible devastation, she and a handful of other medical professionals she knew in the city flew at their own expense to Sri Lanka to help. They staked out a location for themselves and began seeing as many as a hundred patients in a day.

After they’d been treating people for several days, they learned that there was a local hospital less than a mile away from them and another clinic, too. O'Connor asked a Sri Lankan friend, “Why are people coming to our little clinic here instead of going to the local hospital?”

The friend answered: “Because at the hospital, someone just asks them, ‘Name? ...Age? ...Complaint?’ and then gives them a sheet of paper and tells them to go take a seat somewhere. But you sit them down with you, you ask them what's wrong, and then you treat them. *You listen to them.*”

O'Connor closed her interview by saying: “It seemed that the most valuable therapy we were providing had nothing to do with antibiotics or wound care. By listening to story after heartbreaking story, by admiring pictures of families once happy and healthy, and by playing soccer with kids who had lost everything, we were able to say, ‘*We care about you, and we share your grief,*’ without actually speaking a word.”

Jesus dealt with needy people all the time. By rights, he should have had “compassion fatigue.” But he did what only *he* could do. He stopped the funeral procession, raised a young man from death to life, and gave him back to his mother. You and I might not be able to work miracles like that, but God has given us resources we can offer that have their own life-giving dimensions of compassion. Sometimes all a hurting person needs is for us to say, as I’m sure Jesus often did, “*Don’t be scared. I’m here, and I’m going to stay with you. I won’t leave you alone*” And, perhaps the simplest of all, after listening to a person who’s down on his luck and ready to give up, we can open our checkbook and say: “*Here, let me take care of that for you,*” and pay his debts.

I believe all disciples want to be like the Master. And, if we want to be like Jesus, that means we want to be *compassionate*. —But remember: compassion is not just a feeling. *It’s a decision to get involved!*