

“Compassion”

Matthew 11:28-30 & Mark 6:3-34

Pastor James York

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Prayer for Understanding Gracious God, inexhaustible source of all good things, we thank you for love. Grant that we may understand your Word. Give us desire to be transformed into your likeness. Amen

How do you find rest for your compassion fatigue?

Compassion is suffering with another. Compassion is carrying someone's burdens with them. Jesus, full of compassion, entered human flesh to suffer with us. Jesus yokes God to us, so together we can carry every burden until all is redeemed. A yoke is a tool that harnesses the strength of two people to carry something. Jesus said: **Matthew 11:28-30 “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke fits perfectly and my burden is light.”**

Compassion means to be moved by something so strongly that you think it, feel it, experience it, deep in your mind, heart, and soul. Compassion is yoking, harnessing, being with someone so your combined strength can move the burden together. Compassion is partnering with another to alleviate the suffering. Jesus has compassion for you, for everyone. We are to have compassion for each other.

Compassion is fatiguing. In both our work and personal lives, people arrive with myriad needs. Compassion does much more than meet these needs, compassion feels what someone who has the need is feeling.

I am intentional in striving to let God's compassion flow through me. My tendency is to be a “fix it” person: identify the need, solve the need, and provide the need. There it is fixed, let us move on. There is little compassion in “fix it” mode. Compassion listens, seeks understanding, desires to feel what the other person is experiencing as they try to meet the need. Once you are yoked together with another in thought and feeling, then you work together to meet the need. Sometimes a person can fix the situation themselves, and they hunger for another's compassion as they meet the need on their own. Sometimes the person has already fixed the situation, yet they hunger for compassion, someone to suffer with them, as they tell of the experience they had to go through to meet the need. Sometimes Leslie and Abigail will start a conversation with me, “I do not need “fix it” James. Please listen.” Conversely, sometimes I ask Leslie to not be in project manager mode rather to listen to me vent.

Compassion involves an interpersonal exchange in which one person feels and suffers with another. Living in the need world of another, sharing their suffering is draining. Many professions create compassion fatigue. Being a good friend, or family member, creates compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue is a condition characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion leading to a diminished ability to empathize, feel, and suffer with others, often described as the negative cost of caring. It is sometimes referred to as secondary traumatic stress. Symptoms of compassion fatigue are feeling helpless, hopeless, or powerless. Feeling irritable, angry, sad, or numb. A sense of being detached or having decreased pleasure in activities. Ruminating about the suffering of others. Feeling anger towards the events or people one perceives caused the suffering. Escaping the present to live in the “good old days” or enduring today to get to a future better time. Compassion fatigue diminishes resilience. One coping mechanism for compassion fatigue is to become indifferent, to withdraw, to care less.

Our scripture today teaches us how to address our compassion fatigue. **Mark 6:30-34 NRSV “The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. Jesus said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and Jesus had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.**

Context is helpful in finding relief for our compassion fatigue. Compassionate Jesus listens as the disciples tell about their compassion, their suffering with others, their carrying burdens with others. Jesus invited the disciples, and

invites us, to **“Come away to a deserted place”** like Jesus did after his baptism before he started his ministry and throughout his life. **Luke 5:16 NRSV “Jesus would withdraw to deserted places and pray.”** Like Jesus did regularly in the morning. **Mark 1:35 NRSV “In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.”** It is time for a deeper teaching about the nature of compassion and how to be compassionate. We are invited to a deserted place to be nourished. Physical food is lacking in deserted places. Jesus is teaching about spiritual food, discovering how to be rejuvenated by God. To come away to a deserted place is to come to be nourished by God, the source of all goodness, to abide in God, to let God’s compassion comfort us and flow through us. The next few verses explain how Jesus nourished thousands of people in a deserted place. Jesus is revealing how to be nourished by the goodness of God, how to love, rejoice, serve with God. How to pay attention to what God is doing in your life and partner with God, be yoked, with God. Where is there peace, joy, energy, love, wonder, invitation in your life? Seek to be nourished by that. I strive to listen to what God is doing in people’s lives, to ask questions to help us discover together how God is healing. I regularly visit with a spiritual director who asks me questions, guiding me, to discover what God is inviting, doing, transforming.

Jesus invited the disciples, and invites us, to go in a boat to the other side. The invitation here is to shift our thinking from “I need to be compassionate” to “I will receive God’s compassion and let God’s compassion flow through me.” Compassion fatigue is certain if one tries to take on the suffering of the world themselves. When one is yoked with God, actively receiving God’s compassion for themselves, then they have an infinite source of compassion to share with others.

Before I became a teaching elder, I was a ruling elder. I was startled when the pastor explained at session that if he did not take a day off a week, take his vacation and continuing education in ways that God nourished him, then his preaching and care for others is crap. He was asking for the session’s support in allowing him to go to a deserted place. He explained that for him ministry was like a bank account. Preaching, serving, administration, caring are all withdraws. For him, enjoying good food, massage, music, and acting at the local playhouse were God’s deposits into his account. Whenever there was more withdraws than deposits, he experienced compassion fatigue.

Jesus’ disciples enjoyed boating and fishing. To journey across the sea by boat is four miles; to journey around the sea on foot is ten miles of rough terrain, including crossing the Jordan. The crowds were waiting for Jesus and the disciples when they arrived which would not be possible unless Jesus and the disciples were taking a leisurely boat ride and or taking time to fish. Jesus was suffering with the disciples, experiencing their compassion fatigue. Jesus was nourishing them, making deposits into their accounts, helping them receive God’s compassion, showing them how to let God’s compassion flow through them.

Overflowing with compassion Jesus says the crowd are like sheep without a shepherd. Sheep are hungry. Shepherds guide sheep to food. Jesus was teaching them how to be nourished by God, to overflow with God’s compassion.

Alleviating compassion fatigue is a shift of action from “fix it for another” to “fix it with another”. Alleviating compassion fatigue is helping each other discover, how we are nourished by God and then helping each other be nourished by God. John Shea explains that compassion fatigue is alleviated when we view our self as equal with another. “The hint in our scripture today is that compassion is a form of rest. How can that be? When we try to be compassionate from self-understanding of difference, we can quickly become worn out. We view ourselves as in a superior position and the other in a needy position. We are called upon from our greater health or knowledge or expertise to help. In order to help, we must understand the person from the inside. The effort entails bringing our greater being into their lesser being and lifting them up. This is heavy lifting and too much of it makes us exhausted. But compassion can also come from a self-understanding of sameness. We can find ourselves the connecting link with the other. This cannot be manufactured. It must be genuinely perceived. We refrain from identifying with the ‘edge’ we may have, the possession, attribute, or knowledge that makes us a little bit better or luckier. This deidentification is not easy to do. All our life we have been taught to use our difference to gain advantage. In order for a shift from difference to sameness to become a possibility, we must come away to a deserted place to rest. Compassion from a self-understanding of sameness is an alternate consciousness. Bede Griffiths, a Benedictine monk worked to develop this alternative consciousness of sameness. He kept praying, “God have mercy on me a sinner.” His prayer brought him into unity with all people. His prayer reminds him, despite a lifetime of spiritual development, that he is one with everyone else, a wanderer in a world of shadows, a sinner.”

Bede Griffiths wrote. “I unite myself with all human beings from the beginning of the world.”

Compassion is uniting with others. Compassion celebrates our sameness. Compassion suffers with others. Compassion journeys with others to be nourished and healed together.

One year ago, I was frustrated, irritable, grumpy and exhausted. Writing a sermon was days of arduous painful work. I was suffering compassion fatigue. The problem was I was not receiving God's compassion. My hip was extremely painful, so I was unable to bike, or hike, or be with trees. As most of you know, these are the ways I am nourished with compassion. Fortunately, I recognized my compassion fatigue and was able to address it by taking virtual hikes online and discovering new ways to be nourished by God.

I have gone through this cycle several times. Being nourished by God and overflowing with compassion, service, and sermons that flow from prayer to reducing my time resting with God, lacking nourishment from God, resulting in compassion fatigue. Ironically when experiencing compassion fatigue, the harder I work the less I accomplish, and it seems the less insightful and inspiring the sermons. I pray, read, write, delete, all through the day, day after day, after day. I went through a mini-cycle of this two months ago. The solution was a change in my routine, adding a midmorning walk. This cycle reminds me to get away with God in deserted places, to abide in God, for when I abide in God fruitful sermons are grown. Apart from God I can do nothing.

Roderick was scheduled to preach today. Typically, the sermon is written at least a week in advance. My first inclination was to force write a sermon. Instead, I sensed that I needed to go out and play, to rake leaves on a spectacular fall day. While I was raking the Holy Spirit wrestled this sermon into my mind. First came the idea of compassion. I objected that compassion was preached on in July. Then came the idea of today's scripture. I objected again that this scripture was used in July and is not on the schedule to be utilized this time of the year. It will not match with the music. That's it. That's all I had, compassion and a scripture. I have learned to trust these promptings. So, I sat down and started to write with no idea where the sermon was going. Each paragraph came in the moment. This way of writing sermons is humbling, surprising, fun, and full of wonder. I have also discovered it is like manna. I need to be nourished by it in the moment, to write it down immediately, for it does not keep. Even if I write down a few notes, if I do not write it in that moment it is gone. I can't remember a single piece; the notes make no sense. The Holy Spirit prompted me to google this, to read that, to add this. Sometimes parts do not make sense to me. The John Shea quote, I had to read it several times to get it. It doesn't seem that insightful to me, I wanted to cut it, but I got the sense that it is for someone else. Sometimes I realize the sermon is for a particular person. Sometimes this person has not been at worship for a long time however at the beginning of worship I see them. Sometimes the sermon is for me, and it also helps others. Sometimes I do not like the sermon, like last week's, the message was harsh, more convicting than I am comfortable with. I know that it made some people uncomfortable. I hesitate to share certain personal experiences that I struggle to explain. Do these experiences make any sense out of context, with the inability of words to capture the mystery? This week I thought the sermon was done. I even sent Lonnie and Spencer the sermon slides. I had it attached to an email to send to Renee and sensed not to send it. I slept sound. The moment I awoke this section popped into my mind. I objected it will make the sermon too long. Transforming sermons flow from my time hiking, biking, and enjoying trees with God.

I had no idea where this sermon was going. I had no intention of sharing this concluding section on my evolving future, deserted place planning. It seems to me that this part is self-serving and should not be in a sermon. Maybe it is here for me, to help me relax, to let go and go on an adventure with God. Perhaps this sharing will inspire you to find ways to get away with God. Maybe it will give you ideas how you can yoke yourself with Jesus, find rest for your souls and lighten your burdens.

I am extremely grateful to the Personnel Committee and session that support me in finding my deserted places, in helping me find ways to bike, hike, and be with trees in the majesty of creation. I am extremely grateful that Leslie has employment that generates enough money for us to travel. Her company is encouraging employees to take some time to work remotely from a rejuvenating place. Leslie and I will travel to a rejuvenating place for 4 weeks to work and be nourished with God's compassion, from January 27 to February 25. One of those Sundays I will share a remote sermon with you from that rejuvenating place. Pastor April, Pastor Riz, and Roderick will each share a sermon. I will be available via text to arrange phone calls, Facetime, and Zoom conversations. I will be responding to emails in a rhythm with being nourished by God. I thank you in advance for allowing me to utilize a portion of my vacation and continuing education time for renewal, so I am rejuvenated and inspired to serve with you for years to come. As a pastor it is part of my calling to model using vacation time to be still and know God, to go to deserted places, to be nourished by God and let God's compassion flow through me. I am extremely grateful because I realize some people do not have vacation time or the means to travel.

I pray that all of us will discover ways to be nourished with God's compassion. Amen