

Gracious Compassion

Matthew 9:35-10:8

June 14, 2020

During my year in New Orleans as a Young Adult Volunteer, I visited with patients of varying ages, races, and with varying ailments and injuries. In the course of a day, I'd visit with at least 20 patients and families. However, out of the thousands of visits I made, one visit in particular sticks out above all the rest. I think it sticks out the most for me because I found out, after the fact, that I wasn't supposed to visit her at all for safety reasons. I was making my rounds in the oncology ward, and outside of one door, there was a sign mentioning that the patient was receiving radiation treatment, but I didn't see a sign that said "Do not enter" or any other such sign. So, I put on gloves and a mask, knocked, entered, and I saw a barrier set up, but again, there was no sign saying "Do not go past this point." I saw no machine for administering radiation like X-ray or anything else. So, I assumed that the machine was taken out at the end of treatment and that the barrier was there for when it was administered for people to stand behind. I went past the barrier, stood by the patient's bedside, and we talked for probably five to ten minutes. While we're talking, she seems genuinely happier than the patients usually were to see me, and I didn't really understand why until after I exited the room.

As I exited the room, a nurse who was coming out of another room saw me and asked me what I was doing, who I was, so on and so forth. I explained the situation, and the nurse then calmly explained to me that any patient receiving radiation treatment is not allowed visitors outside of their attending nurse and oncologist. Family and friends are not allowed in the room with them, nor are they allowed to receive visits from the pastoral care department, and that's when I understood why she was so cheerful to have me there: because she wouldn't be allowed to see anyone besides her nurse and doctor until she got out. She potentially understood me as knowing that and still taking the risk (one I didn't know about) to ensure she felt cared for, and for me to come near her when I shouldn't have, perhaps that showed off a level of compassion that she needed in her situation. I never saw her again after that, so I never got to ask her, but the thought of drawing close to those needing compassion, even when rules, norms, etc. dictate otherwise, this is an integral part of the Christian mission, and it's the message of today's reading.

In today's reading, Jesus is sending the disciples out to proclaim the good news. In reading what Jesus says to them, we find two key directives worth expanding upon. The first directive/order is "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons." In short, show compassion to those who otherwise would have none. The sick, for fear of their spreading whatever ailment they have, were sent away to be with other "sick" people, generally by healing pools. To touch a sick person when you yourself are not sick, not only do you risk contracting what they have, but you also would be deemed "ritually unclean." The same goes for lepers. If you had any skin abnormality at all, be it rosacea, freckles, moles, whatever, you too were sent away to be with other lepers, and to come into contact with a leper was to become ritually unclean. Similarly, to touch a dead person would make you ritually unclean because you risk coming into contact with their blood, urine, or other bodily fluids. As for the possessed, though touching someone believed to be possessed would not make you ritually unclean, they were still cast aside and isolated. Consider the story of the demoniac. He was shackled in a

tomb in a graveyard, where evil spirits are believed to dwell, and left there to die basically. All four of these groups are persons that “normal” people would not dare approach and who were cast aside because of something that was not their fault. In other words, all four of these groups felt the brunt of humanity’s cruelty and were the most in need of compassion. So, to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons, the disciples and us as readers would have to draw close to them. They and we are therein called to show compassion towards those who otherwise may not feel compassion at all. However, there is a condition to this, which happens to be the second command.

In addition to showing compassion to those who otherwise may not feel it, Jesus commands them (and us by extension) to do these things “without payment” because they have received the ability to do these things “without payment.” The ability to heal, to cleanse, to cast out demons, to give life, these are gifts that have been graced to the disciples as gifts. Therefore, just as they received them free of charge, they therefore need to do them free of charge. Plus, even if they had paid for these talents somehow, someway, one has to wonder if compassion would continue to be “compassion” if it were paid for. Jesus is making an argument that compassion has no price, that you cannot sell compassion. Compassion is something that is freely given, lest it cease to be compassion at all.

What does this mean for us, then? How do we in the 21st century apply these commands from 2,000 years ago to our lives now? We do this by being Christians, by going out to do what others won’t for whatever reason. We are sent into the world by Jesus, equipped with his teachings, to show compassion towards those who are cast aside; to listen to and give voice to those without a voice (e.g. victims of discrimination); to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God; and to do all of this free of charge. Compassion takes many forms, and we are called to show it to our fellow humans, be they friend or foe, be they known or unknown, and no matter their demographics. On top of that, regardless of who it’s shown to and how it’s shown, it must be given graciously, without charge. As Christians, we are called to show compassion to one and all as freely as it has been shown to us. In closing then, we must all consider: How has the Spirit led us to fulfill our calling to graciously show forth compassion to others, both in our individual lives and as the communal Body of Christ?