

**BGCW6/6/10 Worship Theme: A Touch of Compassion:** I Kings 17: 8-24, Luke 7: 11-17

The two passages read today are about compassion. Princeton University defines compassion as: “a deep awareness of and sympathy for another's suffering or the humane quality of understanding the suffering of others and wanting to do something about it.” The special offering for the victims of the earthquake in Haiti that Greta Morrow told us about, and Joe Dougherty’s plea for people to help coordinate Cheyenne Interfaith Hospitality at our church during the minute for missions are perfect opportunities for us to demonstrate this kind of compassion. Fellow human beings are hurting, and it sounds like we are going to take steps to do something about it.

Compassion was first shown to us by God when he created and blessed us in the creation story. God continues to touch us with his marvelous compassion, today. On one hand, compassion can be a wonderful emotion and action. On the other hand, in certain circumstances we may not really want to show the compassion needed because it can be very expensive emotionally and monetarily, and complicated to practice. We will see all of these dynamics as we examine today’s scripture passages.

In the case of Elijah, and the widow of Sidon and her only son, the compassion came in some unusual ways through Elijah’s praying, listening to the voice of God and God touching them all with his compassion. As we heard, the process of showing compassion involved a tough journey for Elijah to a foreign land that was in drought and famine, not unlike in Haiti with little fresh water and food supplies of their own. This journey also involved a widow showing Elijah an expensive compassion by using the last of her meal and oil to feed this foreigner, even while knowing that she and

her son would then die from hunger. Yet, God's touch of compassion was still there, for through Elijah, God promised grain and oil jars that would never be empty, and the end of the drought. It all came true. God blessed Elijah, the widow and her son with his compassion beyond any human expectations.

But, as I said before, compassion can be very complicated at times for it often shows up in the midst of tragedy. As we heard, the only son of this woman who cared for Elijah and whom God provided endless food and water, became so ill that he stopped breathing. The woman was devastated and rightly cried out, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" But Elijah took the boy and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again." "The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah took the child and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." So the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth." Elijah and the woman knew it was not Elijah who revived her son, it was God. Through this touch of God's compassion, this woman was not only given back her son, but she now a relationship to the one true God.

A stunning conversion had occurred. Compassion can be wonderful, expensive and complicated.

We see the same touch of God's compassion when Jesus was in the town of Nain near Jerusalem. As we heard, he saw a dead man being carried out and realized that he was his mother's only son, that she was a widow, and that she had counted on her son to be her sole means of support. Jesus had compassion on her and the dead son. He told the woman not to weep. With his touch of compassion, he raised the son back to life and returned him to her. This act of compassion was similar to the one Elijah was a part of, but the big difference was that Jesus was God with those people. Stunned by what they had seen, the people glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" The word of God's compassionate touch through Jesus spread throughout the land. This led many to come to follow Jesus.

Is this not what we want to ultimately have happen when we generously share of the bounty God has given us with the people of Haiti or give shelter, food and fellowship to families who are part of Cheyenne Interfaith Hospitality Network? We want them to know and follow God in Jesus Christ like we do. Like Elijah and Jesus, we do not push them to conversion. We simply offer God's touches of compassion and allow God in Jesus Christ to come to them in those acts. "Beneath the surface" of these passages, "then, we see these two magnificent characteristics of God's work" of compassion. First, God sees the needs of people and intervenes to bless. Second, God is capable of not just increasing what is good or decreasing what is bad; but, rather, God can completely turn around any circumstance, taking what is an extreme bad and turning it into an extreme good. From

want to abundance, from persecutor to evangelist, from death to life: God is the God of total conversions. This is God's distinguishing feature." This is God's wonderful compassion in action. "Emphasis," June 2007.

I found a modern day story that I think demonstrates Christ's touch of compassion, even when the person involved does not realize it is his touch. It is a case where the practice of compassion was very complicated and very expensive on an emotional level, but God still turned it into a conversion.

A Donnette Liotta writes a true story she titles: "For My Paco."

"I am a healthy twenty-three year old, born with normal vision, normal hearing and normal speech. My twin sister, Dawn, was not born so lucky. My mother was very young when she had given birth to my sister and me. Because we were born so early we were placed in incubators until we were three weeks old. While in the incubator, the doctor administered too much oxygen to my sister. She was later diagnosed with cerebral palsy, a nervous disorder which causes a malfunction in the sensory motor skills and also brain damage. She had undergone several unsuccessful surgeries to restore her sight which was completely gone in her left eye and only 68% detectable in her right eye. Along with a slow developing brain, and legal blindness, it was also determined that she was legally deaf in her right ear. She had to wear braces on her legs and she had to walk with crutches. She stuck out like a sore thumb connected to all these contraptions, often causing people to stare and point.

While growing up a twin, I felt my identity was not my own. I wanted to just be Donnette, NOT DAWN'S TWIN SISTER. We lived in a small neighborhood where my sister was the only 'different' child. We were both

constantly picked on, and we never had any friends because of my sister's condition. I began to loathe my sister, and I did everything and anything to get her into trouble to get back at her being born mentally retarded and physically disabled.

I felt like she was a constant thorn in my side. I was embarrassed to be seen with her, so I made fun of her right along with the other children. When I turned twelve my mother was so disgusted with my behavior towards my sister, she figured I was old enough to know better, and that I should love my sister for who she is, for that is the way God created her.

My mother threw me in my bedroom and gave me a thick yellow book which looked to me like a photo album. What I saw in that book changed my life and my attitude about the way that I viewed my sister and other handicapped people like her.

There were numerous baby pictures of my sister and I dressed alike, the only difference: Dawn was hooked up to tubes and needles and machines. She had her hands and fingers taped so that she would not compromise the patch on her eye from surgery. She looked like a mummy. I looked small and peaceful. There were also several pictures of the two of us in the hospital until we were three years old. Once again, Dawn was wrapped up in a glorified mummy outfit, with tubes and needles attached to her everywhere. If you looked closely, you could see the pain reflected in her eyes. The picture that stood out the most was a Polaroid snapshot of the two of us in the crib hugging each other. The caption below read, 'I am so happy to get a visit from my twin sister, Netti. The doctors make me cry. She makes me laugh.'

I noticed one common factor in all of the pictures: even though she was

in a great deal of pain, and suffering so much, this baby girl, who some would call a handicapped retard, smiled so big for the camera. I realized then what my mother was trying to show me. I felt ashamed at the way I treated her, and I cried myself to sleep.

Later that evening, my sister crawled over and woke me up for dinner. I kissed her and hugged her and profusely apologized for my behavior. She looked at me with uncertainty in her eyes. I knew she did not know what I was talking about. But I knew, I knew.

From that moment on, I was my sister's protector. No one was going to hurt her for any reason. If the children in the neighborhood did not want to play with us because of my sister, so be it. We would play with each other. We did not need them. We were inseparable.

Now as I look back, I realize that I never once took my sister's feelings into consideration. I did not want to know my own sister's story of why. I was so caught up in my own selfishness that I never saw her pain. I never put myself in her shoes. I never had to struggle to do normal, everyday activities. I could run and jump all on my own, without crutches. I never knew how blessed I truly was, or how special Dawn is.

I know that I made it worse for her, because she longed to be 'normal' like me. Strangers do not understand her because they do not know how to deal with her, nor do they have experience dealing with her, so they treat her indifferently. But I am her sister, her blood, and I should have been there for her straight from the beginning. I am her other half, just as she is my other half. When Dawn hurts, I hurt: that is the unbreakable bond Dawn and I share. After all, I AM DAWN'S TWIN SISTER, and she is my world. 'I love you, Paco!!'"

Ah yes by the touch of Christ's compassion on the heart of this woman a conversion occurred, even when the person involved does not realize it is his touch. As we heard compassion is not always easy to show, can be very expensive and very complicated to practice, yet, by the grace of God in Jesus Christ it happens.

And now for us—out of his compassion, Jesus invites us to his table to eat and drink with him despite our sins, our fears, our prejudices and doubts. We know how expensive and complicated this compassion was for him. He understood our plight, our suffering and did something about it. May he touch us and convert us to follow him and demonstrate his compassion to others as he so generously pours it out to us.

Please turn in your Bibles to the Old Testament Lesson in I Kings 17: 8-24. The Prophet of the Lord, Elijah is involved in two miracles that bring new life to a widow and her son.

8 Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, 9“Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” 10 So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” 11 As she was going to bring it, he called to her and

said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." 12 But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." 13 Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. 14 For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth." 15 She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. 16 The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah. 17 After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. 18 She then said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" 19 But he said to her, "Give me your son." He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. 20 He cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" 21 Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again." 22 The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. 23 Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." 24 So the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth." The Word of the Lord.

Please turn to the Gospel Lesson in Luke 7: 11-17. In this passage, Jesus like Elijah is involved in a miracle that has a very positive ending for a widow and her son, but it startles the people who witnessed it.

11 Soon afterwards, he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. 12 As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had

died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. 13 When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." 14 Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" 15 The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 16 Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" 17 This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country. The Word of the Lord.

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

June 6, 2010

Rev. Bob Garrard

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