Hospitality: Moving with Compassion

Beloved community: I invite us to be together in a spirit of prayer. Holy Loving Spirit, we are grateful for the freedom and joy to be gathered today by live stream and on this land – loved by the Wahpekute Dakota and others across time and where we are now weaving our way of community. Help us to gain new perspective on how we can move with your compassion in our time and spaces. We trust you, Holy Spirit, to challenge and encourage us along the way. We pray this in the way of our great teacher, Jesus. Amen.

Throughout the month of September, we are exploring the theme of hospitality. Last Sunday, we heard the gospel story of the encounter between Zacchaeus and Jesus. They invited us to understand hospitality as an orientation or posture of openness to possibilities for connection with one another. I shared my conviction that hospitality is, at its strongest, a practice of mutuality**.** More than welcoming one another into particular places or activities, hospitality is fundamentally the move to welcome each other into being seen and known.

In our first century gospel story for today, a Samaritan comes across a Jew at a point of immense need. We hear about the decision the Samaritan makes to act with compassion – that is, to 'suffer with' his Jewish neighbor. And, if we quiet our minds enough this morning, we may even begin to feel the decision the Samaritan made.

In our contemporary reading for today, poet Naomi Shihab Nye might invite us to sense "*the tender gravity of kindness*" in the gospel story. I would like to issue this challenge to all of us: **If I fancy myself a compassionate person but the persons with whom I attempt to share compassion don't feel a shift in the weight of their load-bearing situation, then I might not be practicing compassion effectively.**

I chose the title for today's message from the words of scripture that encapsulate the Samaritan's moment of decision – "*a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion*." When a small group of us met this past Wednesday for our midweek text study (which we call Connecting With The Word – all are welcome), I asked us to describe both times when we felt seen, noticed and treated with compassion and times when we noticed suffering and were moved to compassion.

In sharing our experiences with one another, we surfaced and named some of the tough or intense factors at play amid suffering and compassion. These factors can really stem the flow of compassion and sometimes even block its movement entirely.

Here are a few of our noticing's, some of which might resonate with you:

- Suffering can be overwhelming AND it stays with us.
- Suffering can displace us – leading us to feeling like we don't belong.
- Compassion involves bearing witness to pain and mess. So practicing compassion requires a high tolerance for sitting in discomfort or dis-ease (sitting, as in, stillness - staying quietly in place). This is challenging for many of us.
- Compassion requires caring curiosity – not a nosy kind of curiosity that seeks the thrill of the juicy anecdote, but the caring kind of curiosity that seeks to come alongside someone in order to understand their experience.

More wisdom yet to come from our group:

- Compassion requires time and attention. At its best, compassion is a practice of steadfast presence with another. When we start to listen to another's experience (as our ears perk up), we had better be clear about whether or not we will actually stay long enough to hear and reach a new level of understanding about the pain and mess in our neighbor's life.

- And, oh boy, practicing compassion requires various forms of acceptance.
    - We need to be able to welcome the feelings of grief that come as the pain, mess, and losses of our neighbor resonate and awaken our own experiences of suffering.
    - We also need to accept that no amount of problem-solving can fix our neighbor's experience of suffering.

Friends, I invite you to come to our Connecting With The Word on Wednesdays. If hospitality in practicing an openness to possibilities for connection with one another, and if God's love can empower us to move into each possible connection with compassion – then how can we respond when the challenging factors involved in encountering suffering – our own and that of others – threaten to cause us to avoid and perhaps even run away fast from the pain and mess?

The practice of compassion surely depends on keeping our feet to the fire – facing toward one another. I'd like to diverge for a moment to share that I understand sin to be acting as though we are separate from each other, separate from God's love, or even separate from who God has created us to be.

I'll share thoughts along this vein from two ancestors in our Christian faith. I was surprised to find these words from St. Augustine, 3rd and 4th century theologian who lived in North Africa and parts of Italy, who wrote this: *"Sin is believing the lie that you are self-created, self-dependent and self-sustained."*

Paul Tillich – fast forward some sixteen, seventeen centuries to the late 19th century and 20th century, German American theologian, wrote this: "*To be in the state of sin is to be in the state of separation. And separation is threefold: there is separation among individual lives, separation of a man from himself, and separation of all men from the Ground of Being."*

So what do we do when we encounter suffering in ourself or another and fear (which is the opposite of love) locks us up and threatens us with the lie that we are separate and should run away? Sometimes we have thought we know <u>why</u> the priest an Levite passed by the wounded neighbor. Sure, they were faithfully following religious customs as leaders in their community. But their reasons may have been more complex.

The Spirit tells me honesty is essential and that we humans are complex. Let's return to the wisdom surfaced by our Connecting With The Words group this past Wednesday.

What do we do if suffering is overwhelming and staying with us? We need to find the spaces and people where we can name exactly that truth – and not hide it in hopes that it will go away.

If suffering is displacing and we're feeling like we don't belong because we are hiding our suffering, let's reach out to community for reminders that we can belong.

If compassion means that we need to sit in discomfort and dis-ease, then let's balance that out by reaching out to the spaces and people where we feel most comfortable and at ease. We need to find that balance.

Compassion does require caring curiosity (not so much the nosy, voyeuristic kind). So let us reach out when we actually have the energy and focus to care for another.

Compassion requires time and attention can be very draining. So let us find the spaces and people who refresh us so that our capacity to share time and attention will be restored.

I'm not sure what to say about how much acceptance compassion requires. But that is yet another spiritual practice. Let's look to one another as we build our muscle of acceptance.

We can move with compassion. It is that for which we were created. May the love of God sustain us in the work of compassion. Amen.

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St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
September 20, 2026 | Connection Sunday
Luke 10:25-37 , "Kindness"