



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Compassion Calls

SERMON BY REV. JUNE BARROW ■ MARCH 12, 2017

Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God.

He is the Maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them—
He remains faithful forever.

He upholds the cause of the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets prisoners free,
the LORD gives sight to the blind,

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down,
the LORD loves the righteous.

The LORD watches over the foreigner
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

Psalm 146:5-9

Beginnings

The world is hard, but you can help. Sixty-five years ago, in 1952, an American went to South Korea to minister to the hundreds of soldiers stationed there during the Korean Conflict. He went for the troops, but Korea was devastated, and everywhere there were children, many orphaned, with no one caring for them. He recalled the words of Jesus who said: “I have compassion on the multitude. I will not send them away hungry” (Matthew 15:32).

First, he tried traditional fund-raising: seeking money from the masses for the masses, but then in his imagination another picture came into focus. What if, for just a few dollars a month, one supporter was connected to one child? And that was the beginning of Compassion International.

Twenty-seven years ago, in 1990, our family became connected to a Compassion child. The kids had started school and we were settled in the house where they would grow up. One evening around the kitchen table, we held a family meeting. The purpose was to decide how our family would celebrate Christmas. What would our traditions be? We talked about grandparents, cookie baking, a real Christmas tree and somewhere from those details came a bigger idea—we should help someone else. That’s how our family first decided to support a child from Compassion International.

His name was Nindabahizzi—hard to spell and hard to say. But the reason we will never forget that name is because one night at bedtime prayers, someone prayed for him and called him “Ninjabawiwi” and our kids fell apart laughing. He lived far away, in Africa, and very slowly we all began to have a dotted line connection to a much bigger world than our own quiet neighborhood. Our children began to learn that the world was not a perfectly safe place and that kids their own age truly needed help for food and shelter and opportunity. As letters went back and forth, we learned some things. This little boy played soccer, loved to draw, went to school, and learned about Jesus in church—just like our kids. But when we sent him money for his birthday, his thank you letter said he used his birthday money to buy a blanket and shoes. And so our kids understood a little more. It opened the world to them, just a bit, just enough we thought.

A Reflection of God’s Character

One day a student asked the famous anthropologist Margaret Mead for the earliest sign of civilization ever uncovered. What would you imagine her answer to be? A clay pot, a fish hook, a grinding stone, a mark on a cave wall, a tool? Her answer was simple: “a healed femur.” A healed thigh bone.

She explained that no healed femurs are found where the law of the jungle, survival of the fittest, reigns. If your leg was broken and you could not hunt, could not gather food, could not defend yourself, you died. A healed femur is proof that someone cared. Someone else had to provide for and protect that injured person until the bone mended. Compassion is the first sign of civilization. Compassion marks us as human.

Of course it doesn't begin with us. It begins with God and His character, His very nature. Jesus showed compassion to people with disreputable pasts, people who needed a meal, who stood accused, who had been married too many times, who were alone, who were afraid, who doubted. He had compassion on an elderly woman, a grieving mother, a blind man, and on lepers who had lost everything including their families. The Bible says this about Jesus: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36).

Who does God see? For whom does God care? Look at the words of Psalm 146.

He cares for the oppressed—

for those who don't get a fair shot at life's opportunities.

He cares for the hungry—

for those whose basic needs are not met.

He cares for prisoners—

for those whose lives have gone off-track.

He cares for the blind—

for those whose physical health limits them.

He cares for those who are bowed down—

those who are overworked or over-worried or overwhelmed.

He cares for the foreigner—

for those who are alone or don't belong.

He cares for the fatherless and the widow—

for those who lack the family love, support, and provision they need.

Who does God see? For whom does God care? Whether we know it or not, whether we say thank you for it or not, every one of

us is a recipient of God's care and compassion. We read in Psalm 145 (the psalm immediately preceding our text for today): "The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made."

Why Compassion?

Now, this is not a controversial topic. No one is *against* compassion, not in theory. But compassion in practice can be costly. It requires us to focus on sights we don't want to see, to understand that the world is hard and we can't fix it. So why compassion? Why does God ask us to do it? What does it mean for us if we open ourselves in greater compassion? What does it mean for us if we don't?

Compassion gives us a response to a hard and troubled world. Suffering people are there whether we see them or not; hardship is there whether we address it or not. Of the many responses to the many troubles of the world, we all know the ones that make headlines every day: protests, demonstrations, accusations, angry faces spewing bitter words. But for us, the followers of Jesus, compassion is our protest, compassion is our statement about the value of human lives and the ugliness of injustice. Someone wrote:

Compassion constitutes a radical form of criticism, for it announces that the hurt is to be taken seriously, that the hurt is not to be accepted as normal and natural but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition.

Walter Brueggemann, "The Prophetic Imagination"

Compassion is a life-giving, life-affirming response to a hard, hurting world. Compassion is our protest, our reply, and our obedience to God. **Christian compassion makes a statement about who God is and who we are.** Every compassionate act is a theological statement: an affirmation that God is good and that human beings matter, no matter how young, how old, how powerless, how poor.

We are not Christ; we cannot save the world. When we open our hearts in compassion, we see how much there is to be done and how little we can do. Many people look away, choosing not to see what they cannot control. A young doctor in training, doing hospital rotations, felt uncertain and inadequate. Here is that doctor's prayer in a

hospital hallway: “Lord, the person in this room is very sick. I didn’t cause it and I can’t cure it, but please show me what I can do right now to help.”

Compassion Costs

The letters went back and forth between our family and that little boy, Nindabahizzi. From the suburbs in Indiana to a village in far away Africa, our children were connected to this boy. Al and I were pleased for our kids to have this small window into the realities of a hard world. Just enough, we thought.

But Nindabahizzi lived in Rwanda and three years after we began writing to him, in 1994, a truly terrible massacre, the genocide, began in Rwanda. The letters stopped coming, but the terrible headline news stories did not. No parent wants to talk to children about matters that are dark and tragic and for grown-ups only. But our kids heard enough to worry and to ask, “What about Nindabahizzi?” Then a letter arrived from Compassion International telling us that Rwanda was in chaos, that the work was suspended, and they were sorry to say they had no information about our child.

C.S. Lewis wrote this:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements: lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.

C.S. Lewis, “The Four Loves”

Compassion costs; compassion is an offering. Where in us does the desire to offer compassion come from? Often it comes through our own troubles. A desire to show mercy and kindness often comes because we have needed mercy and kindness ourselves. The Bible says that it’s a wonderful circle, a divine recycle. God comforts us and out

of that we comfort others. It says: “God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

Do not doubt the equipping that the Lord has given you, through your gifting and through His work in your life. Your own suffering, sorrows, and failings—as well as your own gifts—are the raw materials through which the Lord works compassion for others.

In this congregation, compassion abounds. You volunteer at hospice bedsides, snuggle babies in the hospital NICU, tutor kids in the New Horizons ministry, cook and serve the hungry at Café of Life, help people in crisis at Love INC, pray and knit in our prayer shawl ministry, work to improve literacy, and help young women facing crisis pregnancies. You gather to pray for others, you visit those in prison, and you sit with those no longer well enough to come to church.

For many of you who work and serve and give, there is a private backstory of your own childhood or your own family or your own struggle through difficulty. As you have received God’s mercy, you offer God’s mercy. My respect and regard for every one of you. And how this congregation loves children! Through Compassion International, we at First Presbyterian have supported in recent years 713 children around the world; currently our members are supporting about 400 children.

Compassion asks us to do something, even when we can’t do everything. True, there is a cost to compassion but there is also a price to pay for refusing to be compassionate. Compassion will make us vulnerable but it also makes us fully human. It lets us grow to be brave and open-hearted persons. Protect yourself at all costs from involvement with the sufferings of others and it’s true, you won’t feel overwhelmed or sad, but you’ll end up with a small and fearful heart. We do get hurt and we do suffer with others. In fact, the word compassion literally means “to suffer with.” Compassion doesn’t always lead to “success,” at least not success stories. Compassion is often not convenient and it’s almost never efficient.

Taking the Long View

Compassion rarely finds simple solutions. Compassion takes the long view. It acknowledges that some matters will get settled only years from now, only through God's power, perhaps only in heaven. But compassion affirms that, beyond our control, beyond our understanding, God is good, God is with us and God is at work.

Nine months after the genocide began, Compassion International sent another letter. Nindabahizzi and his mother were alive and had moved to another part of the country. His father had been killed. Compassion International was again at work in Rwanda, re-opening centers, offering provision and protection and the dignity of affirming that every human life matters to God.

We have had many Compassion children since that time. Both of our kids, when they were in college, began supporting with their own money a Compassion child. Our grandchildren write the letters for their family now. They stand next to their dad as he types what they want to say to a child who lives far away. They know the world is hard; they know that they can help.

Mostly, if you do not choose to grow in compassion, no one notices. You look the same, joke the same, have normal conversations—but something in you is changing. And someday words will come out of your mouth or a quick decision out of your will that will make someone else turn to look with distaste. A small, cold heart will show.

And if you are compassionate as God is—to lonely people, hungry people, sick people, weak people, people without family, without resources, without power—you will look and sound like everyone else. Mostly, no one will notice. But someday, there will be a moment when words come from your mouth, when a quick decision comes out of your will—and someone else will see us all the way through: they will see that God's life is in you and that your heart has become large and open and brave, filled with God's loving power, with compassion.

Two weeks ago, a dear uncle of mine, a World War II Navy veteran, died. In his tribute I wrote this:

When we are children our happiness is looked after by the grown-ups in our lives. For me, one of those grown-ups was Uncle Pete. When he was around, there was camping and boating and skiing and cooking out and making ice cream. He was full of fun and he was generous.

So many grown-ups contributed to my happiness and my opportunities. They provided for and protected me. And I want to be that kind of grown-up for other children.

The world is hard, but we can help.

Oh Lord, bless those among us for their acts of kindness and compassion. Help those among us in need of compassion. Soften our hard hearts. Give us courage to stand firm on the truth that You are God and You are good and that You work even through us, even through us, even through us. For the high privilege of serving in Your name, we thank You. Amen.



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

BONITA SPRINGS

9751 Bonita Beach Road | Bonita Springs, Florida 34135 | 239 992 3233 | fpcbonita.org