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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## FOR LOVE OF A CHILD

SERMON BY REV. JUNE BARROW ■ MARCH 18, 2018

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Of all the words you will hear this morning, there will be seven to remember. Just seven words. Our topic is not controversial; it's **compassion**. No one's against it. Everyone's for it. All of us need it. All of us have it to give. It's not simple. It's hard. The needs are many; the problems complex; our efforts small. No one can do it all and it may feel that no one can do enough.

Let's begin with one of Jesus' most famous stories. It's the story of the Good Samaritan from Luke chapter 10 (beginning with verse 25):

<sup>25</sup>On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Right away we know something about this conversation. The expert in the law is testing Jesus. Rather than answering, Jesus asked the questioner a question (Luke 10:26-27):

<sup>26</sup>"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

<sup>27</sup>He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind;' and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

We could summarize it this way: love deeply, love God with everything in you, love your neighbor unselfishly and generously.

The passage continues (Luke 10:28-29):

<sup>28</sup>"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

<sup>29</sup>But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

We recognize this kind of reasoning, don’t we? This is the kind of twisty reasoning that says, “Well, it depends on your definition of...” Define “neighbor,” he is asking. Did he truly want to understand? No. the Bible tells us his motivation; he wanted to justify himself. As Jesus often did, rather than playing by the rules of the game as laid down by the questioner, he changed the rules. He simply told a story (Luke 10:30-33):

<sup>30</sup>In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup>A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup>So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup>But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.

In this story, Jesus told us three times that someone saw the need. The priest saw and crossed the road; the Levite, who was a religious official, saw and crossed the road. The Samaritan, a member of a sneered-at minority group, saw the same sight the other two had seen. But when he saw, he was moved with compassion; and he acted (Luke 10:34-35):

<sup>34</sup>He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. <sup>35</sup>The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

The Samaritan traveler went close to the injured man and cleaned his wounds. He put the man on his own donkey, which meant he must walk. He took him to an inn for bedrest and food and safety.

The next day he continued on his own journey. He left funds for the ongoing care of the injured man and a promise that he would return. Jesus then posed his own question (Luke 10:36-37).

<sup>36</sup>“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

<sup>37</sup>The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

The care was practical, providing food, shelter, and medical care, the basics we all need. The care was personal. This kind traveler had resources and he shared them. He owned a donkey; he could afford to pay hotel bills. The care was well-done and ongoing. He promised to come back with additional funds if needed and with a personal look-in on the patient.

Let’s go back to the two other men in the story, the two who saw a need, crossed the street and turned away. Before becoming too critical of them let’s consider that maybe they had good reasons why they should not stop that day. What thoughts might they have had? “What can I do? ... I cannot stop crime singlehandedly ... I didn’t cause it ... I can’t fix it ... I can’t help every crime victim ... this road is dangerous ... I am just one person ...”

For us too, the needs of this world overwhelm us. No one can meet every need one sees. No one can do everything. No one person can take in foster kids, visit shut-ins, join a jail ministry, tutor children, work at a shelter, serve in a soup kitchen—not all those things, not possibly. So here are three more words: commanded, created, called.

Compassion is commanded to all who honor and follow the Lord.

My whole being will exclaim,

“Who is like you, LORD?

You rescue the poor from those too strong for them,  
the poor and needy from those who rob them.”

Psalm 35:10

The Bible makes it clear. Followers of Jesus show compassion. Period.

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Ephesians 2:10

### **Created Differently**

God has created us for specific good works, specific acts of compassion, kindness and mercy. We are created to do something, but not everything.

Here's how I learned that. My husband Al is a psychologist. He's been invited many times to support Christian groups working in Africa and Asia. Usually I went along on the trips, too. On one trip we stepped into an emergent situation. A young staff member, who had been the victim of a crime, was in crisis, deeply traumatized, struggling and unable to work. Upon our arrival, the team leader asked us both to meet with this person. We met for two hours a day, three days in a row. Al did the work; I was just there. It was grim. It overwhelmed me. To see the trauma this young person was experiencing undid me. For days, I couldn't forget the story, I had trouble sleeping, I couldn't focus. I was deeply disappointed in myself, because I wanted to be a helper. Finally I remembered, there is a full-time, live-in psychologist at my house. I told Al about my distress. He very kindly said, "You are not created to do work like this and you shouldn't. You don't have the personality; you don't have the boundaries for it. It's not how God made you." I asked him, "What was it like for you to hear that story?" He shrugged. "It was another day at the office." Al was created and called to be the helper for those experiencing serious trauma. I was not.

You are not created to meet every need. But you are created and called to do some things, to be the compassionate face, the listening ear, the helping hand, the generous giver to some person, to some specific need. What does it say in Ephesians 2? "For you are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for you to do."

## Seven Words

So we've had seven words: Jesus described compassion that was practical, personal, well-done, and ongoing. Each of us is commanded, created, and called for certain moments of compassionate care, when we are the ones who see a need, who don't pass by, don't turn a blind eye, don't turn aside, but who do turn around.

In this congregation, some of you tutor needy children, counsel at a pregnancy center, visit people in jail, sit beside the dying, cook for the hungry, write cards, knit shawls, visit the homebound, and look out for your neighbors. It is heartening to see your compassion, to see your hearts kindle with kindness.

## Compassion International

Today, let's take a closer look at a specific ministry: **Compassion International**. Sixty-six years ago, in 1952, an American man went to war-torn South Korea to minister to American soldiers during the Korean Conflict. He went for the troops, but he saw the children everywhere he looked. Many were orphaned, many hungry. He knew he could try to help and he knew he must. "Perhaps," he thought, "I should try to raise money?" But he caught a new vision. What if, for just a few dollars a month, one supporter was connected to one child? That was the beginning of Compassion International.

Compassion International serves children all over the world. Their practical care provides nutrition, health-care, clean water, and education. Their care is personal. Monthly support helps local people: teachers, nurses, and church workers who know the children and their families. They teach them, and live among them. The care is well-done. Dr. Bruce Wydick, professor for the Department of Economics at the University of San Francisco, studied the question academically and published the results in the April 2013 issue of the prestigious *Journal of Political Economy*. He wrote:

... children who participated in Compassion's holistic child development program stayed in school longer, were more likely to have salaried or white-collar employment, and were more likely to be leaders in their communities and churches.

First Church has had a very special relationship with Compassion International over the years. Members of this congregation have supported more than 900 children, all around the world. Currently our members support more than 450.

Half of the Compassion children sponsored by First Church members live in the Dominican Republic. Some of you have gone with the Missions Team to see the work and meet the children. Al and I have sponsored Compassion children for 28 years. We've never met any of them face to face and probably never will. Our current crop of kids live in Kenya, Guatemala, and Bolivia. We know them a little and they know us a little, but their Compassion teachers know them well. They know their names; they know their needs. They speak their language and visit their homes. The Compassion staff does the day to day work; we are in the background, providing some of the funds to supply good food, medical care, clean water, and strong education. The world is a hard place; the contributions make a difference.

The cost to support a child is \$38 a month. You can pray for your child, write letters and receive letters from that child. You can also have a creative partnership with your grandchildren where you pay the funds and your grandkids write and receive the letters. What a wonderful way for your grandchildren to learn about compassion!

### **Nudged by God**

In 2010 Al and I met a young man from West Africa named Desmond. He'd only been in the U.S. for a couple of months. His extended family had raised the money for a one way plane ticket and one semester's tuition. But they were unable to send more; there were other children to support. Desmond had no green card, he couldn't get student loans. He was watching his opportunity at a university education slip away. Something happened to Al and me; we saw a need and began to think that God was inviting us to turn around rather than turn away. We didn't know how it might work, but I can tell you that amazing things worked out, some of them downright miraculous. At the end of the day, our part to play in Desmond's life was reasonable, doable, practical, personal, and possible.

Here's the reason I'm telling you this story: we were privileged to see firsthand what plans God might have. We saw Desmond go from wanting to make money to send home to his mother, a good goal, to wanting to become a doctor and serve in Africa, a great goal, to wanting to address comprehensive policy changes for the delivery of health care across the whole continent of Africa. The name for that discipline is *global health* and it is a very big dream!

Desmond went on to earn a graduate degree in global health from the University of Notre Dame. Today he works for Harvard Medical School doing research for a global health project in two African countries. He travels all the time. His calls begin with, "Where are you today?" "In Tanzania," or "in Boston," he'll reply. One day last fall he said, "I'm in New York City for the United Nations General Assembly, attending the U.N. committee meetings on global health."

His vision to improve health care in Africa is large and well informed. He is becoming well equipped. We believe that God gave him this vision. We will never know the full reach of it, because much of his lifework will likely happen beyond our lifetimes. And that's exciting! Because we invested in a young person, Al and I are connected by a filament thread to something much greater than ourselves. And we have received far more than we ever gave. Knowing Desmond is like having another son.

### **Sponsorship Empowers Dreams**

What are the odds for the more than 900 children that First Church members have sponsored, that one, or two, or ten, or fifty of those kids will have a special call on their lives? A vision for change? A burning heart to make a difference where they live? When we support these children, we are empowering their dreams, their visions, the work for which they were created.

In the Dominican Republic, there is a young man named Jonathan. Rejected and cursed by his own father, he became part of the local Compassion project when he was six years old. He tells us that being part of the Compassion project and the relationship with his sponsor

changed his life. Today he is one of the excellent adult Compassion staff leaders there, and a friend of our own Director of Missions, Trusha Barner. Recently he and his wife had a baby boy. This baby is being raised in a loving Christian home with a godly father because of the compassion that a sponsor had for Jonathan so many years ago. Sponsorship changes lives now and for generations to come.

In 1952, in war-ravaged Korea, an American man saw hungry children. There are still hungry children there. We still have the same choice that the travelers on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho had. Will we turn a blind eye? Will we turn away? Or will we turn around and help?

There are hungry children, but, Friends, we are hungry too. We are hungry to help, hungry for purpose, hungry to do hard and holy things, to proclaim that God is good, that God is love, and that Light will never stop shining in the darkness. When you feed a child's hunger, you also feed your own deep hunger. There are still many Compassion children who are waiting for sponsors, waiting for someone to say, "I'm here. I'll help." It matters. ■