

COMPASSION – A HUMANE INSTINCT

Mark 6:30-42

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham
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As I drive from place to place, my car radio is often turned on, frequently tuned to NPR or the BBC. I don't care much for the shrill and strident voices and gravitate more toward thoughtful commentaries. Over the years, some of my favorite segments on NPR were the commentaries of the series called "This I Believe." People from all walks of life submitted short *credos*, brief statements of some truth they held close. Most were positively framed: "I believe in the strength of community," "I believe in resilience" – that sort of thing. But one compelling credo was offered by a Chinese immigrant to this country, and it caught me off guard. He began, "I believe in a potential for brutality." The writer was Yinong Young-Xu, who came to this country from Shanghai when he was sixteen. He now holds a doctorate in epidemiology from Harvard and specializes in treating post-traumatic stress disorder.

When I was six, in the streets of Shanghai, near the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, I watched a parade of trucks carrying political dissidents on their way to be publicly executed. At the front of each truck was a young man, roped from head to toe, wearing a sign that read, "Counter-revolutionary." If not for that, you would have had trouble guessing what the event was. There was an air of festivity; thousands of bystanders were laughing, talking.... It was like a traditional Chinese New Year's celebration — except the city was celebrating its own brutality.

I believe we are brutal because innocence can be corrupted, like mine was as a six-year-old in a time of revolution. When I entered first grade, I started to wave flags, denounce the politically fallen of the day and shout, "Death to counter-revolutionaries!" My friends and I did not want to miss any of the meetings where political dissidents were publicly tortured and humiliated. That was entertainment for us....

.... I believe brutality is a disease just like cancer; each and every one of us is at risk, including me.... When our better instincts are suppressed, isn't that the beginning of brutality? I am fortunate. I was too young to be a Red Guard where my brutality would have been codified. And I had a grandmother who showed me the value of kindness....

....I wish we could learn to prevent hatred [and brutality] from forming.... I teach my children that hitting is not allowed, period. I encourage them to be compassionate, to aid those in need, and to stand up for the weak. Most of all, I try to be vigilant over the purity of my motives and cautious about my actions. I believe I must guard against my own potential for brutality and the mutation of my own humanity.¹

¹ Yinong Young-Xu, "A Potential for Brutality," in Jay Allison and Dan Gediman, eds., *This I Believe II: More Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2008, 230-232.

Well, what do you think? We look at our world, at our own country, and what do we see? A deepening racial divide over police shootings. The increasingly accepted trend of belittling, taunting, and disparaging those with whom we disagree. Close to 800 active “hate groups” in this country.² A *Washington Post* poll saying 59 percent of the American people approve of using torture in interrogation of suspected terrorists.³ Yinong Young-Xu is right, I think: it is so important to teach kindness to our children and guard against the mutation of our humanity.

So, today I would lift up that clause from Davidson’s Statement of Purpose that says: “The primary purpose of Davidson College is to assist students in developing humane instincts...” And I would say that of the “humane instincts” the College might offer the world, none is more important than compassion. The word *compassion* means literally “to suffer with.” It’s a learned behavior, a honed instinct, born and nurtured in *relationship*. Says one Christian teacher,

The call to compassion is not about somebody “doing for” somebody else. Rather, its value is in the ... relationship ... in which everyone is changed. The Hebrew prophets say that we find our own good in seeking the common good. The prophet Isaiah says that when we feed the hungry, take in the homeless, and “break the yoke” of oppression, we find *our own healing*. He also says the act of compassion requires that you “not hide yourself from your own flesh.” In other words, *compassion* means recognizing the kindred spirit we all share together.⁴

Compassion goes beyond random acts of kindness; it takes kindness beyond sympathy to empathy, to the embrace of another’s pain or distress. It is a virtue worthy of the Church’s time and commitment, especially a church like this one, with such resources for understanding the root causes of the world’s distress, and a mandate to take compassion into action. We often learn from mission travel that people do not *care* how much we *know* until they *know* how much we *care*.

Compassion is rooted in the very nature of God. Christian compassion, more particularly, finds its moorings in the compassion of Christ. And no story, I believe, more vividly exhibits the nature of such compassion than the story of the feeding of the 5,000... the only miracle story included in all four Gospels, which points to the importance of its memory for the early church.⁵

What is so compelling to me about that story is its humanity. The disciples are tired. In the early days after their commissioning, the excitement and enthusiasm was enough to sustain them. But by now the constant press of people seeking healing and help has sapped their strength. So Jesus invites them off on a kind of retreat, to get away from the crowds.

² According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, there are 784 active hate groups in the United States. <http://www.splcenter.org/what-we-do/hate-and-extremism>, accessed June 1, 2015.

³ http://takingnote.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/12/17/facts-figures-americans-for-torture/?_r=0, accessed May 11, 2015.

⁴ Jim Wallis, *Who Speaks for God?* New York, Delacorte, 1996, as cited at <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/excerpts.php?id=14195>, accessed May 5, 2015.

⁵ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, 163.

Then...well, the crowds follow them. Thousands of people line the shore, waiting for some word, some help from Jesus.

You can sense the disciples' disappointment that the crowd is still pressing toward Jesus, but Jesus seems energized and engaged. They try to remind him why they have come to that place, but he is more interested in why *he* has come there. Mark says that Jesus, seeing the crowds, had compassion for them, and he wanted his disciples to have compassion, too. And so, when the disciples ask him to send the people off, as it is late and they have no food, he tells them, "You give them something to eat." And you know the rest, about the loaves and the fish, and how there was more at the end than when they started.

It is, perhaps, fitting that Jesus' most vivid demonstration of compassion involved the provision of food. It is, in part, what we do whenever we break bread within the community of Christ...whenever we extend the bread and the cup to all who come to feed their deep hunger.

Early one morning about 15 years ago, Sarah Miles wandered into a church for the first time and received the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Having been raised in a thoroughly secular family, she found it a profound, transforming experience. Until that moment, Miles had thought that church was about doctrine and piety; she discovered it was about feeding those deeper hungers. Before long, that taste of communion bread led her into a feeding ministry – into the provision of groceries for hungry people, a ministry that expands even today. And that ministry unfolded a whole new understanding of Christian compassion. Looking one day at the crowds that pressed into her food bank, she discovered something that surprised her:

The people who came to get food at the pantry had been, to regular middle-class churchgoers, basically like Jesus – that is, invisible. We knew they were there, but we couldn't see them, and their sufferings and loveliness were imagined, not incarnate in a specific body.

But as I got to know them, I started to see more clearly how the people who came to the pantry were like me: messed up, often prickly or difficult, yearning for friendship. I saw how they were hungry, the way I was. And then, I had a glimpse of them being like Jesus again: as God, made flesh and blood.⁶

By the sea one day, Jesus had compassion on the crowds, and began to teach his disciples about seeing with eyes of compassion and responding to what they saw by simple acts of humanity... simple acts that had within them the power to transform great need into a demonstration of divine grace. Are not such acts of humanity what we would like to mark us as people of humane instincts... as people of compassion?

Of course! Still, I am haunted by Yinong Young-Xu and his memory of the festive crowds in Shanghai gathered for summary executions, haunted by his residual belief in our potential for brutality. As a counter-story I share an autobiographical account by the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko. When he was a child, his mother took him to Moscow, a city still

⁶ Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*, New York, Ballentine Books, 2007, 120.

stunned by Hitler's violence on the one hand and Stalin's on the other. They joined thousands who witnessed the procession of some 20,000 German war prisoners through Moscow's streets:

The pavement swarmed with onlookers, cordoned off by soldiers and police. The crowd was mostly women – Russian women with hands roughened by hard work ... and with thin hunched shoulders which had borne half of the burden of the war. Every one of them must have had a father or a husband, a brother or a son killed by the Germans. They gazed with hatred in the direction from which the column was to appear.

At last we saw it. The generals marched at the head, massive chins stuck out, lips folded disdainfully, their whole demeanor meant to show superiority over their ... victors. "They smell of perfume....," someone in the crowd said with hatred. The women were clenching their fists. The soldiers and police had all they could do to hold them back.

[But then] something happened to [the crowd]. They saw German soldiers, thin, unshaven, wearing dirty, blood-stained bandages, hobbling on crutches or leaning on the shoulders of comrades; the soldiers walked with their heads down. The street became dead silent – the only sound was the shuffling of boots and the thumping of crutches.

Then I saw an elderly woman in broken-down boots push herself forward and touch a policeman's shoulder saying, "Let me through." There must have been something about her that made him step aside. She went up to the column, took from inside her coat ... a crust of black bread. She pushed it awkwardly into the pocket of a soldier, so exhausted that he was tottering on his feet. And now from every side women were running toward the soldiers, pushing into their hands bread, cigarettes, whatever they had. The soldiers were no longer enemies. They were people.⁷

What was the difference between the crowd before and the crowd afterwards...or the difference between the crowds in Shanghai and this crowd in Moscow? The difference, I would argue, was compassion – the capacity to see the other as one sees oneself, to recognize our common humanity, and to reach out to the other's hunger and pain. Or, as Sara Miles found, it might have been *Christian* compassion – which is the capacity to see one's own face mirrored in the face of another and to recognize there, upon closer examination, the very face of Christ.

Inasmuch as you have had compassion for one of the least of my brothers and sisters, Jesus once said, you have had compassion for me. Compassion. A humane instinct, and one our country and world need desperately. And so, in Christ's name, I urge you – I *beg* you – to cultivate compassion. And pass it on.

⁷ Yevgeny Yevtushenko, as cited by David W. Augsburger, *Hate-Work: Working Through the Pain and Pleasures of Hate*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/excerpts.php?id=14331>, accessed May 5, 2015.