

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Following Jesus 101: Serving Compassionately - Part 2
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Exodus 3:1-12; Matthew 14:13-21

Why didn't Jesus just feed them? Why did he even have to get the disciples involved? After all, if God could feed the people in the wilderness with manna, couldn't Jesus just have showered the people with bread? They were all good questions, and questions I have gotten over the course of my ministry. The basic premise is that if God is omnipotent, meaning God can do anything God desires, then why does God need our help? I must admit that I am not sure how I answered that question over the years, though I'm sure my answers must have been stunningly unbrilliant because they didn't satisfy anyone. So where I have landed is that I cannot answer the why, of why does God do this? I can only answer the what; that what God does is to work in partnership with us. From the moment of creation when Adam was given the responsibility of tilling the garden, to Abraham and Sarah who were tasked with taking a journey in order to bless a broken world, to Moses, to the disciples, God has always chosen to engage in joint ventures with human beings in order to heal humanity and to recreate God's one-world family. And today is no exception. For you see, we have all been called to that same task, of healing humanity ... and to do so through serving compassionately. Let me explain.

First, a visual. This morning I have brought with me the basket of blocks our children played with...which are like the blocks my brothers and I enjoyed. There are red blocks, blue blocks, yellow and purple cylinder blocks and even square blocks with letters on them. They are, for the moment, all together in this single basket...which is a way of seeing God's desire for humanity. We are to be one family, composed of all shapes and sizes and colors. We are to be together, living in unity. Yet as human beings we could not do that. We began to kick certain blocks out of the family. Red blocks hated blue blocks, who feared the yellow cylinders, who thought they were better than the purple cylinders ... and I think you get my point. Soon there was no, one human family, only clusters of blocks, fearing, hating, enslaving and destroying other clusters. Yet this, as I said was not God's plan. God's plan was for a one world family. So how to get everyone back in the basket? I suppose there are many ways, yet one of the most effective is through serving compassionately.

Let me be clear here, that serving compassionately is not simply doing something for someone else. Serving compassionately is a four-step process that not only puts compassion into action to help those in need but helps to heal the world. And the steps are laid out for us in our Exodus story:

Step one, we observe. God says, "*I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt.*" One of the great problems with humanity is that is that we tend to categorize those we don't know and then apply stereotypes to them. Oh, we know what those red blocks are like. We know how blue blocks think. And yellow blocks, well they are lazy and dangerous. Our stereotypes do not allow us to see beyond two-dimensional characterizations of other blocks. How do we move beyond this? We move beyond by observing. Observing here means more than simply looking at something, it means seeing others as blocks with their own stories, hopes and dreams. It means seeing others for who they are and not as cardboard cutouts of blocks, but multidimensional creations of God. We are called to observe because in so doing, we begin to connect with others in new ways, thus bringing some of us back into the one basket of God's family.

Step two, we hear them. God says, “*I have **heard** their cry on account of their taskmasters ...*” Just as we often see other blocks through stereotypical lenses, we often believe that we know what those blocks need. We know how to serve them and give them what they need. Unfortunately, this is not always so. One of my favorite stories about this comes from our own Terry Chaney. Terry, who is blind, once visited a church where someone decided that they would help him to a pew. And even though Terry tried to tell the person that what he was really looking for was the rest room, the person never asked. What we are called to do is to hear the other blocks. Hearing here means more than simply acknowledging the sounds around us. It means to listen deeply to those in need and discover what it is they need and desire. Not what we think they need. Granted, this takes time. It takes a willingness do more than drive-by serving. But this is what God does, God listens and so are we to listen too. In so doing we not only hear about the real needs of those blocks, but we connect more deeply with them, thus once again, moving more blocks back into God’s basket family.

Step three, we are to know their sufferings. God says, “*Indeed, I **know** their sufferings...*” As I said last week, a better translation of this part of the verse is, to feel their pain. In some ways this is the most difficult part of serving compassionately. It is difficult because we cannot get inside someone’s head, we cannot feel what they are feeling, we cannot know exactly what it is like to be a blue block or a red block. But what we can do is share their space, if they will let us. My image for this comes from the book of Job. In the book of Job, Job loses everything; his home, his flocks and herds, his family and his health. He ends up sitting on a dung-heap. But he does not sit alone. His friends come and sit with him. Sharing his space and his pain. This is what it means to show compassion ... to suffer with, to suffer beside. And when we sit and share space block to block, we begin to connect and heal the block brokenness, thus one more time bringing blocks back into the basket.

Step four, we act. After observing, hearing and knowing, God acts. God says, “*I have come down to **deliver** them from the Egyptians ...*” I realize that so often what we want to do is do for others, yet I believe that what most people want is for us to do with them. Over the years, I have observed that people want a “hand-up” and not “a handout”. They don’t want pity, they want self-respect. They don’t want to be dependent but interdependent. This is the theory behind Habit for Humanity. With Habitat, no one is “given” a home. They work with others to build or rehab it. They take on loans to pay for it. Habitat is blocks working together to serve those in need. It is compassion in action to change the lives of blocks of all colors, shapes and sizes. And when blocks serve together, it unites them and draws them back into God’s one world basket block family.

I believe that this theory of serving compassionately was behind Jesus command for the disciples to personally feed the crowd. By so doing the disciples were forced to see each person there as more than a face in a crowd. They probably heard their words of thanks for the food, they were physically present with them in their hunger on the hillside and then they shared what they had. The people became more than a nameless, faceless set of blocks, but they became real and a deeper connection was created.

Over the past eight weeks we have explored what it means to follow Jesus. We have learned that we are called to love radically, forgive unconditionally, share lavishly and serve compassionately as followers of Jesus. And in so doing we are made part of God’s grand rebuilding plan for humanity. For with each of these actions we are building connections block to block, neighbor to neighbor, and stranger to stranger. We bring more and more people back into God’s one world family. My challenge to you, then, is to ask yourselves, “How am I bringing blocks back into the basket of God’s family by loving, forgiving, sharing and serving?”