

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Parables on the Way to the Cross: Compassion Culture  
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Jeremiah 31:1-9; Luke 15:1-10

I want to begin this morning with Presbyterian Final Jeopardy. There is a single question for which I am looking for the correct question. Unfortunately, you are not playing for any prize money or the opportunity to return and play again tomorrow. And since we have no buzzers and are not supposed to speak loudly, if you know the answer, simply raise your hand. So here is the answer. *“This two-word phrase describes the phenomenon or practice of publicly rejecting, boycotting, or ending support for particular people or groups because their views or actions are considered to be socially or morally unacceptable and are thus disapproved of by a particular segment of society or a particular culture in its entirety.”* Ok, so the few of you who know the question have been reading and watching the news. The correct response is, “What is cancel culture.” The phrase has been used to refer to everything from Dr. Seuss to Colin Kaepernick. It has been bandied about by folks on the right and on the left. Though I had never heard this phrase until recent times, according to one source it was coined in the 1970s. But, it has been around a lot longer than that. It is in fact what the Pharisees and the scribes were trying to do to Jesus.

Before we move deeper into the stories for this morning, I want to say something about the Pharisees and the scribes. Though these two groups of people have often been described as if they are villains like Darth Vader or Voldemort, they are not. The Pharisees and scribes are persons who take their obedience to God’s law with utmost seriousness. Their one desire is to be completely faithful to God and to God’s Law. The way in which they strived to be faithful was by building what commentators have called fences around the Law. In other words, if one was not supposed to work on the Sabbath, then they had to create a wall of rules and regulations that insured that one did not even come close to working on the Sabbath. The problem with Jesus, from the point of view of the Pharisees and scribes, was that he was constantly breaking down those walls. He was breaking down the walls by eating and drinking with and healing and inviting into God’s presence people whose lives were not lived inside the walls built around God’s Torah. These were the “sinners and tax collectors” mentioned in the story. These actions by Jesus were the reason that the Pharisees and scribes wanted people to publicly reject, boycott and end public support for Jesus. This is why they wanted to cancel him.

That being the case, we might think that if there was one community that would refuse to be involved in cancel culture, it would be the church. Unfortunately, this is not the case. In fact, the church has been one of the great instigators of cancel culture. In the church’s earliest years, it wanted to cancel Roman religions. Then the church at Rome wanted to cancel the church at Constantinople and vice versa. Then the Roman church wanted to cancel the Protestant churches, who wanted to cancel the Roman church, and everyone wanted to cancel the Anabaptists and the Jews. Two more recent examples: When I lived in Pampa, Texas there was a couple who joined our church and afterward the leaders of their former church made it clear that no one in their church should ever speak with them again. Our new members had been canceled. And recently a church that was a member of the Southern Baptist Convention welcomed some LGBTQ members and the church was immediately disfellowshipped or canceled by that denomination. In other words, cancel culture is alive and well in the church.

What fascinates me about all of this cancel culture within the church is that Jesus never created a cancel culture within his sphere of influence. Instead, he created a compassion culture. Before we move forward, I want to say a word about compassion and how I am using the term. Often in our society we use the word compassion in the same way we would use the word pity, meaning to feel sorry for someone. This way of understanding compassion is hierarchical, meaning someone “up here” has pity on someone “down there.” It makes the one showing compassion greater than the one receiving compassion. This is not how the word was originally used and not how I am using it. Compassion is the act of loving deeply with another. “Com” refers to the act of being with another. “Passion” refers to the act of loving deeply. There is no hierarchy in compassion. There is only a communion of love and connection. With that definition in mind, let’s see how God and Jesus create cultures of compassion instead of cancellation.

We begin with the passage from Jeremiah. For those of you who were with us for last week’s episode of Parables to the Cross, hopefully you remember that Jeremiah, on behalf of God, was warning the people of Judah that they were headed toward the iceberg of the Babylonian Empire. And if the people did not return to being a people who bore the fruits of peace rather than the ways of violence, Judah would be sunk. Well, the people did not listen, and their ship of state and religion crashed and sunk, with a disturbing loss of life. At that point we might have expected God to have canceled Judah and its people; to have found another people who might listen. Such is not God’s way. God had infinite compassion which we can hear in these words. *“The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness. The Lord appeared to them from far away and said, I have loved you with an everlasting love, therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you...again you will take your tambourines and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers...again you shall plant vineyards...”* God does not cancel but comes alongside those whose lives seem at an end and restores them to fullness and joy. This is compassion culture.

We hear echoes of this same story in Jesus’ parable. Jesus speaks of a sheep and a coin that were lost. The shepherd and the woman could have written off the sheep and coin. The shepherd and the woman could have canceled the sheep and coin, but the shepherd and the woman would not do so because the sheep and coin were loved; they were valuable. The sheep and coin were valuable enough, loved enough, that the shepherd and the woman insisted on taking any risk, meaning leaving the other sheep in the wilderness, or expending any amount of energy, meaning sweeping and sweeping, until these beloveds were found and made whole again. Then, just as Jeremiah described, there was to be a party for the sheep and coin who had been found and welcomed home. This is compassion culture. This is the culture Jesus created when he became one of us, when he came alongside us. This is the culture he created when he broke down the walls others had put up around God’s love. This is the culture he created when he reached out to those society had canceled, had labeled as sinners, had pushed to the margins. This is the culture he learned from the one who sent him; the one who loves with an everlasting love. This is the culture we are to create.

We live in a world in which the church has canceled people because of the color of their skin, because of their national origin, because of their gender, because of their sexual orientation or perhaps even because of their political affiliations. This is not the world Jesus came to create. Jesus came to fulfill God’s desire for a world in which compassion culture is at the heart of all that the people of God believe and live. The challenge I want to offer you for this week is this, to ask yourselves, “How am I creating a compassion culture, that welcomes all in the name of the compassionate Christ?”