

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Living in Ordinary Time: Offering Compassion”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
June 5, 2016

Exodus 22:21-27

Luke 7:11-17

“I don’t know what to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know how to help all of the people around the world who are in need. I’m not rich. I have bills I have to pay. And the needs of people all over the world are so great that what I could give will not make a dent at all.”

“So why don’t you just choose one thing and give to that?”

“But how can I choose? If I choose one, then the others will go without.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I just don’t know.”

The person you have just met has just been afflicted with one of the western world’s great diseases, compassion paralysis. Compassion paralysis is a disease that occurs when limited resources come into conflict with unlimited need, causing people to not do anything because they either cannot decide who to help or they believe that what they can give will not really make a difference. The question this morning then is, is there a cure?

The answer is yes there is a cure, and the cure is to look to the compassion of Jesus. I realize that many of you will say, “But John, Jesus was all about compassion. It was his middle name. It was in his job description. He would never have been afflicted with compassion paralysis.” My response would be that if we look at the time in which Jesus was living, if anyone ought to have had compassion paralysis it was Jesus. This is so because Jesus lived in a time when infant mortality was extraordinarily high, the average life span was probably no more than 40 years, diseases were rampant, simple cuts could lead to infections that were incurable thus making life for ordinary Greeks and Jews short and tenuous. You might reply, well sure, but Jesus had the ability to heal. That is right but even so had Jesus healed people twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, he would not have made a significant difference in the overall outlook of life. It would have been easy for Jesus to have just given up and retired to Nazareth.

Yet as we see in our story this morning, he didn’t. Our story begins as Jesus and his followers are about to enter a small town called Nain. As they approach, they see a funeral procession. In the

procession and mourners, a funeral bier and a weeping woman. Jesus senses that the woman is a widow, meaning there is no husband with her. There are also no other son's supporting her. Jesus realizes that this woman, without her son, will be left impoverished and alone, reduced to begging without a place to go. As Luke tells us Jesus had compassion for her. He moves to the dead body, commands the young man to rise, and as the man is resuscitated he gives him back to his mother, thereby giving life to two people; physical life to the child and a life with a future to the mother. By this act Jesus demonstrates the heart of the compassion of God. He demonstrated Biblical compassion...the compassion that is the cure for our compassion paralysis.

I say this because Biblical compassion, Jesus-like compassion is, simply put, the desire to give life when and how we can. Let me say this again, Biblical compassion, Jesus-like compassion is, simply put, the desire to give life when and how we can. When I say give life, again, I don't mean raising people from the dead. Life in scripture refers not merely to physical life but to lives well and fully lived; lived with enough to eat, a place to sleep and an opportunity to live to the fullest of one's abilities. Giving life in scripture means to offer resources and opportunities to enhance the lives of others even if it is in a marginal manner. Compassion begins when we desire to do any of these things for another. Let me ask then, how many of you want to help give life to another? How many of you as a follower of Jesus believe yourselves called to offer life? Great, then your compassion is at work.

The second part to curing compassion paralysis is to actually offer life when and how we can. All of us know that the needs of the world are greater than any one person can address. Bill and Melinda Gates with their amazing foundation know they cannot solve all of the world's problems, and so have chosen to focus narrowly on a couple of significant issues, including Malaria prevention. Former president Jimmy Carter, through the Carter Foundation, decided to focus on getting rid of Guinea worm disease. Even Jesus never raised every dead person that he saw, or healed every sick person around him. The task of compassion then is to choose to do what we can, when we can, and how we can. It may be to assist with SOS. It may be to buy a Church World Service blanket. It may be to help at Alcott once a week, or with shop and drop, or with meals, or perhaps to give a small gift to the International Children's Network or similar organizations. It may be to offer a kind word, a smile or a hand up to someone in need. Remember, compassion does not require solving all the problems of the world, or even a single problem, but giving life where and how we can.

The cure to compassion paralysis is right in front of us. It is in front of us in the compassion of Jesus, who showed compassion when and how he could. And that is my challenge to you for this week, that as you come to the communion table to ask yourselves, how am I allowing my compassion to give life even as I have been given life?