

“What Is Your Level of Compassion?”

Matthew 9:35-38

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Communion Devotion

Mother Teresa had it. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. did, too. Television superstar Oprah has it and so does U-2's lead singer, Bono. All of them had or have the kind of compassion described in today's text. It is a compassion that reaches to the inner most core of a person, moving him or her to respond boldly with immeasurable generosity and grace.

Jesus also had it. As a matter of fact, some believe that compassion was the most compelling force in his life. It enabled him to see what others ignored and act while others stood idle. This was because he felt the pain of those that were sick, sorrowful, hurt, hungry, lonely, poor, weak and confused. He could not abandon them as so many others had even if it meant making heavy sacrifices.

Surely we see that this morning. Everything on this sacred table reminds us of his compassion. He poured his heart and soul into leading those that were like sheep without a shepherd. He became a strong advocate for those whose lives were made more difficult by religious and political leaders. He used his talents to relieve the suffering and pain of those that others held in contempt. He used his encouraging words to give hope to those in despair.

So deep was his compassion that he never wavered even in the midst of stiff opposition. This was because he was as courageous as he was compassionate. When faced with the choice of running away and saving his own life or staying with sheep that needed a shepherd, he stayed. When confronted with the choice of focusing entirely upon his needs and pain or comforting the thief to his side, he turned his attention to the other cross. When presented with the choice of hating his enemies or forgiving them, he forgave.

This is a level of compassion rarely seen in our world. It is the kind of compassion needed from us, however, if wounds are going to be healed and people are going to find hope. It is the level of compassion needed to combat the hatred and ill-will that permeate our world.

We live in a dangerous world that is filled with violence. So did Jesus. How did he respond to this violence from the beginning of his ministry to the end? He did so with courageous compassion. He knew that the intensity of hatred in society must be matched by an equal degree of compassion or hatred would win and rule the day.

When he said the fields were white unto harvest and pleaded for his disciples to pray for workers to enter the fields, what did he mean? I believe he meant that we must bravely walk into a hostile world and show it another way to think and live. Surely you see the connection between Jesus' compassion and his call for workers in the fields.

Like Jesus, we must respond to evil with good and pain with empathy. We must listen to those suffering from injustice and speak truth to power. We must be willing to use our time, talents, energy, influence and resources to build bridges to people, not walls between them. We must even be willing to suffer and die out of love rather than retaliate or seek revenge out of hate.

I think I know why there are not many workers in the “fields that are white unto harvest.” This kind of farming is hard and costly. It is the only kind of work, however, that will produce a harvest of peace and good will. For I believe with all my heart that justice must precede peace and hatred must be met with an equal level of compassion. Anything less will fail.

And do you know where all this begins? In your home and mine. In our neighborhoods and workplaces. In our schools and churches. In the marketplace and in the boardroom. In the courthouse and the state house. In the halls of Congress and in the White House. On the mission field and on the battlefield.

“Let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream,” Amos wrote. The only thing that will blast open the dam of hatred and let the waters of justice flow is the level of compassion that Jesus taught, lived and modeled.

You and I have a few minutes to think about this while the bread and cup are passed. I encourage you to use every minute of it to talk to God about your role in the “fields that are white unto harvest.” Where is your field? Who in your field is hurting? How do you need to respond as a disciple of the crucified and resurrected Lord?

Mother Teresa had it. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. did, too. Oprah has it and so does Bono. They all had or have this deep level of compassion. What about you?