

“The power of personal presence”
The high ground to which compassion calls us

September 19, 2010

Text: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1, Luke 7:11-17

I.

What do you do when the loved one of a friend dies? Or, perhaps, it’s an acquaintance—but you still know them; what do you do? It happens all the time. For sure, we want to do something. But we’re not always sure what that *something* ought to be.

Earlier this week, I was chatting with one of our daughters and she was telling me about a dear friend from her graduate school days who, in the last few months, had lost both of her parents. Our daughter had already called her friend, who lives in New Orleans, and left a message. Still, should she call her again? What should she do?

And particularly when a younger person dies or there are tragic elements involved, what do you do and what do you say? As a pastor who feels a calling to *grief ministry*, I’m asked these sorts of questions all the time.

What I try to suggest to people is basically three things:

1. To begin with, do something.
2. Secondly, whatever you do, respond from the heart, from down deep—which takes energy and focus.
3. And lastly, in case you’re worried about it: words are *not* that important. What’s important is *presence* and the compassion that *presence* brings ... which means *being there*, as best you can, in some caring way.

Often, in these situations, we think we have to say something; and, understandably, we worry that it might be awkward or we might mess it up. I’m not suggesting that we *not* say anything. There are usually some helpful words we can share if we wish. What I’m saying, is: that’s *not* the most important thing. The most important thing is being there.

I love the story that I shared over a year ago. A group of children were asked to respond to the question, *What does love mean?* One of the best responses came from a four year-old little boy whose elderly next door neighbor had just lost his wife.

Seeing the man crying one day, the little boy went into the old gentleman’s yard, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there.

When his mother asked him what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said,

Oh, nothing, mommy, I just helped him cry. How precious! And what a perfect response, as well.

In our support and nurturing of one another, in our loving and sustaining of each other, *presence* is the most important thing. *Presence* really says, *I care*.

Think about it! To be *really* present to another human being takes energy and effort. It takes deep feeling and compassion. We have *pay attention* and be *in the moment*.

II.

Compassion is to *feel* with another person. *Compassion* is a common theme in both the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures (the Old and the New Testaments). In our reading this morning from **Jeremiah 8**, Jeremiah, whose prophetic task it was to pronounce a painful judgment on his people, is overcome with pathos and compassion for his people.

CHECK IT OUT, as God, through **Jeremiah**, cries out:

My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick ...Hark (or, listen closely to) the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land ...

For the hurt of my people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.

Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people.

In these gripping words, we can *feel* the compassion of God and Jeremiah, overcome with sadness and grief for Israel. Later, in Jeremiah 31, the prophet is again expressing deep sorrow for his lost people:

Thus says Yahweh: Is Israel my dear son, my darling child? For the more I speak of him, the more I do remember him. Therefore my womb trembles for him; I will truly show motherly-compassion upon him.

In this Scripture, God's compassion is *womb-like*, like a *womb*. Such vivid language conjures up all kinds of images of God as *life-giving, nourishing, caring* ... this is what God is like.

III.

In the Christian Scriptures (the New Testament), this becomes part of what it means to *love*. To *love*, indeed, is to have compassion for a person, to feel for them, like a mother feels for the innocent child in her womb. Indeed, as the Christian Scriptures unfold, early on it becomes clear that *compassion* is the primary characteristic of Jesus.

1. We see this over and over again in Jesus' ministry. In Matthew 9, after Jesus had been

teaching in the cities and villages and proclaiming the Kingdom of God—curing every disease and sickness, the Gospel of Matthew says,

*When he saw the crowd, **he had compassion for them**, because ... they were like sheep without a shepherd.*

2. Later, in chapter 14, when some crowds had heard about Jesus, even when he was trying to get off by himself for some personal time, the crowds followed him; and the gospel says:

*When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and **he had compassion for them** and cured their sick.*

3. In our reading this morning from Luke, when Jesus encounters a woman, overcome with sorrow at the death of her only son. She was also a widow, it turns out.

*And when Jesus saw her, the Gospel of Luke reads, **he had compassion for her** and said to her, **Do not weep.***

4. And in Luke 15:20, in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, when the young prodigal, after wasting all of his inheritance on immoral living, at last *comes to his senses*, he sets off to go back to his father.

But while he was still far off, Luke says, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. The father, here, is symbolic of God. *Compassion* is God's reaction to any human act of contrition and repentance.

As Marcus Borg says in his popular book of some years back, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, which many of you have read:

- *According to Jesus, compassion is the central quality of a life faithful to God, the compassionate one.*
- *For Jesus, Borg goes on, compassion was more than a quality of God and an individual virtue. It was a social paradigm, the core value for life in community.*

IV.

It's in this larger sense that the compassion of Jesus IS *personal presence*. It's not cheap. It takes energy and focus that flow from a caring and sensitive heart.

There's nothing more powerful and more loving than to be personally *present* to a person or to a group of people when they're hurting or sick or bereaved—when they're vulnerable in whatever way. To actually *be* there speaks volumes.

You don't have to say anything. Personally, I believe in *prayer as presence*. To just *be* there with a heart-felt hug or pat on the back means everything. We're fundamentally social beings. As social beings, we thrive on the personal touch—we need the personal touch. The words are secondary.

What's important in so many situations in life—particularly with our children and with our families is *personal presence*. Most of you, no doubt, have that figured out.

- That's why when our children are participating in sports or the arts, we attend their games ... or their tennis matches ... or their recitals and other performances.
- Being a vital *presence* for our sons and daughters is so important.

Growing up, I will never forget my mom and dad showing up at virtually all of my games and events. It makes you feel good inside: ***The power of personal presence!***

That's why when we see boys and girls, young men and women, reflecting back on their lives about how their parent, or parents, were absent, it's so sad. It's sad because it means so much.

More than personal gifts, more than words of praise, it's the most powerful gift we can give our children ... our *presence*. Our *presence* is a vital part of our caring, a vital part of our love.

V.

We care about people by *being* there. On special occasions, to be sure. But also in the day-in and day-out grind of our lives. *Being* there for another. There's power in *personal presence*.

This is totally true in the church. I guarantee you, your being here today means something to somebody. Your presence, your words of caring and support; they mean something. Our church life isn't just about us as individuals; it's about us as church family where we are caring and nurturing of one another.

Think about your lives, friends! There are places, all the time, where we need to be—to be a *presence*. At a graduation, for example, or any other special event; at a Baptism ... a wedding ... a Memorial Service. There are places where we need to be—again, the power of personal *presence*.

A three year-old little boy and his grandmother were studying a plastic model of the human heart. They located all the chambers and arteries. When they were finished, the little boy asked, innocently, *Where's the love, grandma?*

Where's the love, indeed? The love is in our personal presence.

1. It's in our visit to the hospital or nursing home.
2. It's in our being there when our child or grandchild—or any child, even—has a game or an event ... and when you might be the only one there to watch them and to let them know that you care and that they are important.
3. It's in knocking on the door of a friend or neighbor, or even an acquaintance, when you know they could use a friend and an act of kindness.

The power of personal presence ...

And when Jesus saw the great crowds who had gathered, he had *compassion* for them and cured their sick.

When he saw the woman whose only son had died, he had compassion for her.

Where's the love? Where's the grace? It's in the ***power of personal presence.***

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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