

Walking in the shoes of another”
Reaching out with a compassionate and caring heart

September 2, 2007

Text: Luke 14:1, 7-14, Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

I.

On this Labor Day weekend, a day when we take pause to remember the workers across America and even around the world, we remember particularly those who labor each day to make a *living wage*—enough to take care of their families; enough so that all people have adequate health care, decent living conditions, and lives of human dignity.

The Church of Jesus Christ must stand with all workers—everywhere—who struggle for fair, just and dignified working conditions ... and for *nothing less than a fair* compensation package as well.

Why, because that’s what Jesus would do; and that’s what our faith mandates. We cannot read the gospels, friends, and not be struck by Jesus’ striking compassion for those living on the edges of life—for the deprived, those shoved to the margins, those victimized by whatever stinging injustice.

And so today, we remember workers everywhere ... and especially those who are often invisible. We don’t see them—cleaning our buildings and homes ... landscaping our properties ... locked in the grind of production at our factories ... working in our fields and in the food industry.

As we gather around the Lord’s Table this day—breaking together the bread of life, sharing the cup of renewal and the *living hope* of new beginnings, we gather in solidarity with laborers everywhere; and we remember ... and we give thanks.

II.

But there is more. Because we are Christians and compassion and fairness pulsate in our veins, there’s always more.

Throughout the Christian Scriptures appeals to mutual love are sounded.

1. *Let love be genuine*, says Romans 12. *Love one another with mutual affection ...outdo one another in showing honor.*
2. In 1 Peter, we’re urged to purify our souls by a *genuine mutual love* ...and we’re to *love one another deeply from the heart.*

We have to remember that, at the outset and until the 4th century, Christianity was a minority religion ... and for decades and more it was viewed as a sect, and as a

problematic sect to boot.

For years and years, Christians were widely persecuted. Good, God-fearing followers of Christ were imprisoned, even tortured at times. And thus, the compassionate emphasis in our reading from **Hebrews** ...

Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; and those who are tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

The emphasis here is on compassion, as it should be. **Compassion is the quintessential Christian virtue.** To have compassion is to literally *feel* what the other person might be feeling ... to the point where their affliction becomes our affliction, their pain, our pain, their sadness and sorrow, our sadness and sorrow.

Many of these imprisoned persons, understandably, were deeply beloved by their families and friends; and their Christian brothers and sisters would go to great ends to support them, to stand with them.

Remember those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them.

Just as the scriptures exhort us to have compassion with the imprisoned—victims of injustice in their day; to imagine ourselves *walking in their shoes*—so today are we challenged as Christians to imagine ourselves *walking in the shoes* of the legions of workers who encounter injustice and unacceptable conditions every day.

III.

Walking in the shoes of another human being is always an eye-opening experience. There are people here this morning who have a tough walk in this life. Always, there's stuff happening. You see, the truth is, *we never know the full story.* Behind the scenes, in the deep recesses of the mind and spirit, there are things happening with folks ... sometimes they've been happening for years.

- Family situations we're dealing with that wear on us ...
- Money problems and circumstances of financial deprivation ...
- Health concerns ... trying to stay healthy and keep on top of things ...

It's life! And life can be hard.

All the more why extending the hand of compassion and being supportive of one another in mutual love is so important.

That's what the authentic Church is about. The authentic Church seeks to walk in the shoes of every human being.

We're grateful, of course, in our contemporary churches, to have modern, well equipped houses of worship ... and to enjoy outstanding music and gifts of the spirit. We're thankful for our many programs and events that deepen the bonds of our fellowship ... and on and on.

Still, at the end of the day, Church is about being the compassionate presence of Christ in the world. We are Jesus' hands and feet. We are his caring heart ...

- reaching out to the downtrodden and deprived,
- to the physically ill and the infirmed,
- to the spiritually isolated and estranged ...

Reaching out to one another as we sort our way through our own deprivations and challenges.

IV.

Taking pause in our busy lives to imagine what it might be like to *walk in the paths of another human being* is an expression of love. When we come to church ...

- Not only are we bringing our worship before God and opening our lives to the preaching of God's word ...
- not only are we learning and growing spiritually ourselves and being challenged in our moral and ethical considerations as Christians,
- ... we're also a tremendous source of nurture and support for one another. I can't emphasize that too strongly.

As we learn one another's stories—deepening the bonds that unite us—compassion grows in our heart and spirit. We are the channels through which God's loving and compassionate hand is experienced.

It's hard to *walk in another's shoes* if we don't know anything about them ... if they remain some friendly-looking person who sits in one of the back pews now and then, but nothing more.

Hebrews asks something of us. It asks us to imagine what it would be like to actually BE that other person. The person in prison ... the person, God forbid, being tortured. The person going through whatever struggle ... at home, at work; or with their personal identity, self-confidence, self-image and on and on.

It's much the same with the worker who's unable to make a *living wage*, whose family has no health care, and for whom every day is an agonizing struggle to make ends meet.

Hebrews asks us to imagine ourselves walking in their shoes.

V.

Our reading from the gospel of **Luke** has a similar emphasis ... on humbleness of spirit, humility and compassion.

When you host a luncheon or a dinner, said Jesus—talking to them in parables—don't invite your friends, your family or your rich neighbors ... knowing that they'll very likely return the favor at some future time.

Instead, imagine what it might be like to be a person who never gets invited anywhere: a person who is poor or crippled or lame or blind. Their name is never on the invitation list.

What must it be like to *walk in their shoes*? Everyday the successful, uptown people walk by them, never really seeing them. Invite them, says Jesus, and you will be abundantly blessed; for they can't repay you. In other words, we're challenged to be bold, get outside of the box, and reach out to people—particularly those in concrete situations of human need.

There's a further blessing that comes to us when we imagine ourselves *walking in another's shoes*. It's a natural corrective of our tendency to judge one another.

One of the wisest teachings of the Bible is to *judge not that we not be judged*. Again, with regard to one another, we NEVER know the full story.

Unless we've walked in another's shoes,

- we can't know the ache in their heart and the deeper longing in their spirit.
- Unless we've walked in their shoes, we can't know the depths of their disappointments and losses.
- Unless we've walked in their shoes, we can't know the inner struggles of their spirit: the lows and highs of their confidence, the reaches of their depression and sense of isolation.

As we voice our support today for workers everywhere ... in these times when we have the huge challenge of immigration reform teetering back and forth in our national conscience, however we tilt or bend, let us always be swayed towards compassion.

What is the compassionate response, we must ask ourselves? Which prompts the question, what would it be like to walk in another's shoes?

Let compassion rise up in our spirit, friends, that the light of the living Christ might shine in us, both now and always.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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