

Be The Church – Show Compassion
Don Lincoln
Matthew 20: 29-34

On June 6th, 2017, Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts delivered the Commencement Speech at his son's 9th grade graduation. Here is part of what the chief justice said:

“Commencement speakers will typically wish you good luck and extend good wishes to you. I will not do that, and I’ll tell you why. From time to time in the years to come, I hope you will be treated unfairly, so you will come to know the value of justice. I hope you will suffer betrayal because that will teach you the importance of loyalty. Sorry to say, but I hope you will be lonely from time to time, so you don’t take friends for granted.

I wish you bad luck from time to time so you will be conscious of the role of chance in life, and understand YOUR success is not completely deserved, and that the failure of others is not completely deserved either.

I hope you’ll be ignored so you know the importance of listening to others, and I hope you will have just enough pain to learn compassion.”

Whether or not 9th graders at a prestigious prep school got it, I found the words incredibly moving and filled with power. “I hope you’ll have just enough pain to learn compassion.”

Our text today is one of numerous instances in the Gospels where Jesus is described as having compassion. Here he has compassion on two blind men. And heals them. In Mark 1, Jesus has **compassion** on a leper – and heals him. In Matthew 9, Jesus has **compassion** on a crowd of people, who He sees as lost sheep; He stops and teaches them, instructs them. In Luke 7, Jesus finds a woman mourning, and has **compassion** on her, and raises her son to life. In Matthew 15, Jesus has **compassion** on a crowd of hungry people, and He feeds them.

I spoke of compassion back in June – in a sermon titled “Gut Check.” I titled it that because the very unique Greek word for compassion is *splagchnizomai*, which literally means “moved in the bowel.” But it’s very clear the word is not just describing an emotion one feels – or benevolent thoughts in response to suffering. Emotions and thoughts are denoted by other words in the Greek. *Splagchnizomai* denotes a visceral response that produces action.

Over and over we see Jesus with the crowds – and Scripture says, “He had compassion” – and He did something.

When we were selecting themes for this “Be The Church” series, we knew we wanted compassion in there. But as we pondered the words/phrases we were going to use, we were very deliberate in choosing “Show Compassion” – instead of “Have Compassion”.

Lest we forget, compassion is not a theoretical attitude, put a practical involvement. It involves doing, not just thinking or saying. A compassionate response to suffering requires that one be moved by the suffering of the other, act to remove the immediate effects of the suffering, and respond at length to correct the structures which may have given rise to the suffering itself.¹

A member of the congregation wrote to me after that sermon in June, in which I had also highlighted a number of ways Westminster members were involved in compassionate action – things like Habitat for Humanity; the West Chester Food Cupboard; Homeless Shelters here in West Chester and center city Philadelphia. She wrote this:

All the examples of charitable outreach you gave were splendid, and you know I believe wholeheartedly in the importance of what different groups and individuals are doing. I believe, however, much of what we do is bandaid-ing, which though absolutely necessary, is not enough. We need charity, but we also need justice.

I am frequently reminded of the analogy of the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff. When people were asked why it was there, they responded that it was there to help the people who had fallen over the edge of the cliff. But why not build a fence at the top of the cliff to stop people falling over?

“Charity is commendable; everyone should be charitable. But justice aims to create a social order in which, if individuals choose not to be charitable, people still don’t go hungry, unschooled or sick without care. Charity depends on the vicissitudes of whim and personal wealth; justice depends on commitment instead of circumstance.”²

She reminded me of our Presbyterian roots. The same roots that gave rise to democracy in this nation, instead of power wielded by individuals – the people collectively governing themselves – the Presbyterian influence on government. The fact is, in its compassion the church has always historically worked for systemic change. “Don’t just give a man a fish; teach him to fish.” It’s why when Presbyterians went into the mission field for years in distant places with the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and salvation in Him, Presbyterians also always put that proclamation into bricks and mortar, building hospitals and schools because we knew those were the ways people would be lifted up. It’s why Presbyterians have always been at the forefront of the need for public education. We wanted systemic change. It’s why we don’t just hand out bottles of clean water, we work to put in water filtration systems in villages in Honduras.

We want systemic change. We’re not just putting bread on the shelves in the food cupboard and we packaging meals with Rise Against Hunger every year, but every year we as a congregation write to our representatives one Sunday every Spring, asking them to approve legislation that assists the hungry; inviting them to not eliminate programs that provide compassionate relief for the crowds. We are to have the same miraculous compassion Jesus had for the hungry. We too can feed 5,000, or 10,000, or 10 million – we just have to work through the structures and systems to show the same compassion Jesus had.

It’s why we have an advocacy group at Westminster, working to put an end to human trafficking, the same way a century ago Presbyterians were at the heart of ending child labor in this country. Because Presbyterians wanted to show compassion to the crowds.

It’s why this congregation has worked to care for creation – seeking to address pollution, cleaner energy, better use of resources – because we believe we are to be good stewards of the resources God has given us, showing compassion for the next generation.

It's why the pastors gathered with other people of faith at a candlelight vigil in West Chester the night after the events in Charlottesville. We went to stand up against racism; because we believe compassion is for all. That's why this past Thursday evening, a pastor and members of the congregation's advocacy group on gun violence were at a vigil at a representative's office out of concern for the increase of deadly shootings.

We have all been moved by the people in Las Vegas who helped victims or those trying to escape to safety into their cars. People who gave of themselves to protect somebody else. We were touched by the line of people all the way around the block who were standing there to give blood.

What a week to have compassion as your topic. But I spent much of the week asking myself: How do we show compassion to the crowd in this instance? What does it mean to respond AT LENGTH to the structures that give rise to such horrible massacres? Our advocacy group on gun violence is working to help us, as people of faith, know how to address systemic change.

Not only because it's unsafe to go to an elementary school – at least in Sandy Hook, Connecticut. Or because you can't go to high school – at least in Columbine, Colorado, or unsafe to go to college at Virginia Tech. And they are not doing that because it's unsafe to go to a theatre in Aurora, or a nightclub in Orlando, or a country music concert in Las Vegas. Where can you go? Church? Not if it's a bible study in Charleston.

A major reason the advocacy group is concerned about gun violence is because two thirds of the gun deaths in this country are not from criminal violence; they're suicides. We've had four such suicides in this congregation since I've been pastor. Most of them committed with a gun **purchased the day of or the day before** taking their life.

Did you know, you have to wait two days before you can use a marriage license!! And, we ALL all know how dangerous that is!!! 😊

I'm a hunter. But for years, and now more than ever, I believe there is need for systemic change in dealing with gun violence in our culture.

Our opening hymn: "Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore." Gun violence has been called "an evil," and we DO deplore it. I don't know what the answers are, but we do have to talk about it.

This nation had compassion on the crowd in the twin towers. We enacted legislation that radically changed our world. This nation hired, trained and deployed nearly 60,000 employees – "the largest mobilization of the federal government since WWII" – to handle airport security. No longer could you be greeted by family or friends at the airport gate. No longer could you take a bottle of water from home onto the plane, and I don't know how many little keychain Swiss army knives I had confiscated before I decided not to carry them anymore.

We made systemic changes. Changes that inconvenienced all of us – at least anyone who flies or takes anybody to the airport. We made the time you need to get to the airport ahead of your flight a minimum of 1 hour, and for PHL I never give myself less than two! Systemic change!!!

It's why this congregation seeks to SHOW compassion – in a multitude of ways – but also including daring to have panels and conversations about gun violence; to expend part of its mission dollars to fight human trafficking around the world – IN OUR COMMUNITY, as well

as in southeast Asia – and to partner with organizations like Bread for the World that seek to alleviate hunger through compassionate legislation.

Jesus showed compassion to the crowds and you and I are called to do the same. Each and every one of us is called to show compassion, to be people of faith – in what we do with our resources, whether that's with our pocketbooks, our time, or at the voting booth.

Well.....speaking of pocketbooks, that's a perfect segue to the dedication of our 2018 pledges today.

I recently heard the following story from former Westminster pastor Tony Sundermeier, now the head of staff at First Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. Tony writes:

"We received an electronic pledge yesterday from a couple that hadn't made a pledge since 2015 because they moved to Wilmington, NC that year. They are now active members at First Pres. Wilmington. These are faithful, generous Christians – always gave abundantly – so when I saw their multi-thousand dollar pledge for 2018 I was not shocked even though it was unexpected. So I called their home....."

Tony: *"Good morning Susan, this is Tony Sundermeier from First Pres. in Atlanta."*

Susan: (surprise in her voice) *Uh, hello.*

Tony: *"I am calling because we received a very generous pledge from you through our online platform and I..."*

Susan: *"Oh no. Oh no. Oh no. I am so embarrassed! I saw an email yesterday from First Presbyterian Church and just clicked the link and made a pledge! I thought it was from First Presbyterian in Wilmington. How do I undo it?"*

So, Tony said, "My new strategy is to send email blasts to members of every First Presbyterian Church in the country with a link to our campaign **AND NOT** follow up with a phone call when we receive unexpected pledges!"

Do you know how many Westminster Presbyterian Church's there are in this nation???? ☺
The fact is, you and I don't expect somebody else to foot the bill for the ministry we enjoy, and the mission in which we participate. Any more than we should always expect **SOMEBODY ELSE** to make a difference in the systems that give rise to human suffering and tragedy. It's **OUR** job as people of faith to help systems change.

When you and I turn in our pledges today, with gratitude for God's blessings, with commitment to making a difference in the world, may you and I also ponder how it is we might individually and corporately "Show Compassion," and seek to change the structures that contribute to – rather than alleviate – the pain in the crowds of God's children in this land and in every land. May it be so.

1. New Dictionary of Christian Ethics, ed. D. J. Atkinson & D. F. Field
2. Email from congregation member which closes with a quote from Bill Moyer.