

“Dare to Care: Action on Small Scale”
Matthew 25:31-46

Today we are looking at the fruit of the tree of compassion. We have been talking a lot about the roots and internal mechanisms that produce compassion from our awareness of our souls and of others to our attitudes toward others and ourselves. Today we are considering what those things would produce in terms of actions. Action is the next natural step after awareness and attitude. We are called to do whatever we can to alleviate suffering in our world. But since suffering seems to be common around us, we may feel overwhelmed at what to do. There are issues such as hunger, aging, poverty, illness, war, and violence which seem to overwhelm us. Where do we even begin? I think that the most important part is to start where you are and where God has placed you in this world. It is essential to find relational avenues for our compassion to the people who need it right here in our own area because Jesus did his ministry in relational ways.

A couple of years ago I learned about a man who did that, and a great movement of compassion and transformation started in his neighborhood. Being part of a community, he became aware of the suffering of people around him and out of that awareness and through compassionate relationships, he and others united to do something right there in their own neighborhood. Let's watch a clip about this work.

<https://youtu.be/yDCPKR-Jzvw>

(Second service) This man is Shane Claiborne and he co-founded the community of *The Simple Way* in North Philadelphia. According to Wikipedia, “Shane Claiborne and five other Eastern University graduates founded the community when they moved into a terraced house in the neighborhood of Kensington in January 1998. They purposely started the community in the poorest area of the city, which was a place where there were no existing local churches. They did not apply for funding from mission agencies. Members of The Simple Way participate in a variety of activities, including planting gardens, running a store, and feeding people who are hungry. When a law was passed that prohibited distribution of food on streets in the city, The Simple Way avoided breaking the new law by instead distributing the Eucharist, which is not considered food after it has been blessed. The community is part of the New Monasticism movement.”

The inspiration for this group is the life and teachings of Jesus about compassion and care in one's community, especially teachings like the one from our scripture for today in Matthew 25. This is a parable which Jesus gave to help people understand his way of compassion and what it meant for them to follow it. This parable is often misunderstood to be about the final judgement of individuals. But Jesus was talking about the judgment of the nations in terms of their faithfulness to God's ways of compassion. We have two groups in this parable: the sheep and the goats. The one group (goats) lives by the values of the world. They don't share the love of God with others and thus don't have compassion for their neighbors. They keep it to themselves and to those they love. Those outside of their familial or social circles are invisible to them. The other group (the sheep) is the one living by the values of the kingdom of God. They are continuing to let God's love flow through them not just to their family and friends, but also to all the people in need. They

live by the principles of Christ's compassion. The shocking part of the parable is that both groups: the sheep and the goats did not realize that what they were doing was directly done to Jesus himself. The ones who cared for the needy did not know that it was Jesus in disguise that they were caring for. In the same way, the ones who did not care for the needy did not know that it was Jesus in disguise that they neglected. This is the shock of the parable. Jesus was undercover and they did not know it. Loving Jesus involved creating communities of care and compassion for those who were vulnerable in society. It required recognizing that God was to be found in the suffering of our neighbors. Jesus was using that theme to help his followers understand that it is not enough for nations or people to just say godly things. It was important for nations and individuals to practice God's laws of love and compassion. That was the true measure of a nation's or a person's success in life. Think of how radical that is today when we tend to measure a nation's success by its national GDP.

This parable from Jesus helps us to see that compassion for our neighbors is the way to know God. The presence of God is as close to us as the person we feed, clothe, protect, or visit. What will bring us fulfillment in life is living by the values of the kingdom of God receiving God's love and sharing it, especially with those who are on the margins of society and who cannot repay us for helping them. Our lives will bear fruit when we practice compassion in our every day life by serving and connecting with our neighbors who are suffering.

Our church has gone through a transformation the last couple of years where we decided to enhance our acts of compassion from generous giving to relational giving. This congregation has always been very generous in its financial giving to the community. The donation of the buildings for Crossroads House and the Children's Center is a good example of that spirit of giving. However, God was pushing us to show compassion through relationships where we give of our time and energy to be with those who need our support. We reached out to the community to learn about areas of need and discovered new ways to show compassion. We discovered the need in our schools for supporting the teachers and staff by volunteering there or doing special projects with them. Sixteen people from our congregation go into Jackson Primary School almost every week to volunteer at the school and to make a difference in children's lives. You also heard a couple of weeks ago about the renewal and expansion of our ministry at the Premier Nursing Home. This week, I would like to highlight the ministry of the monthly Community Social Program which is a respite care program offered for those living with Dementia. We have about 15 volunteers from our church and the larger community who come together to provide four hours of social fun and interaction for our guests. This ministry provides care that the guests need and respite for their caregivers who need the support. We are blessed today to have Mickey Charters share with us what this ministry means to her and why she does it. How do you see Jesus in the guests and their families? Mickey sharing...

Roula: We are all invited to bear the fruit of compassion in our lives. The key is opening our eyes and hearts to the people of our lives who need that compassion and care, especially those who cannot repay us for such compassion. Canadian Catholic writer and

theologian Jean Vanier writes the following as a challenge and invitation to all of us (screen): “There are many hungry people in our world. God is not going to send down some bread from the trees, because if somebody is hungry, it’s our problem. If somebody is sick, it’s my problem; it’s your problem. If somebody is closed up in an institution because he (or she) has a disability, it’s my problem. We have to do something about it. If people have a toothache, you don’t just pray for him or her, you take them to a good dentist. And Jesus says to us, ‘It’s up to you to do something about it, but I give you my spirit. I’ll give you a new force, a new strength, and a new wisdom so that you can break down the dividing walls of hostility.’ It’s up to you and me, but God will give us strength if we open our hearts...and ask for that strength.” Amen.