

The Practice of Compassion
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Mark 1:40-45

In the book, *Sowing Seeds of Faith in a World Gone Bonkers*, Larry Davies tells a story with which many of us are able to identify. He tells of the check-out line at his local grocery store. It was long and he was in a hurry. Seeing another line nearby nearly empty, he moved over and stood behind the only customer ahead of him. A young twenty-something woman was holding a small basket with fifteen to twenty jars of baby food. There was nothing else in the basket: just baby food.

“This is great,” he thought, “She’ll only be a minute and I can be on my way.”

The clerk took the woman’s check for seven dollars and forty-three cents and efficiently typed in the numbers and slid it in the proper slot on the register. At this point the cash drawer was supposed to open and a receipt printed, but not this time. A light began to blink: “See Manager.” The clerk called on the intercom for the manager while running the check through again on her register. The same sign kept flashing: “See Manager.” “Oh no!” thought Davies. “Not another delay. I’m in a hurry and don’t need for the cash register to break down.”

When the manager arrived, however, he didn’t even look at the cash register, but instead picked up the check and began to talk to the customer. Davies could feel the muscles in his stomach tighten as the reality of what was happening struck him. The check for \$7.43 was no good and the manager was quietly saying she could not buy her baby food here. The clerk quickly set the groceries aside, closed her account and began to ring up Davies’ purchase.

“She should manager her money better!” Davies tried to convince himself while leaving the store. But his flimsy excuses would not erase the picture in his mind of a grocery basket with jars of baby food.

Davies writes, “At this point, I want to finish the story by writing how I approached the manager and offered to pay for the purchase of the baby food. It was the right thing to do. I don’t have much money, but I can afford seven dollars and forty-three cents. Instead, hiding my light under bowl, I turned my head and walked away. There are no acceptable excuses. I had a great opportunity to help someone and walked away.” Yes, I am sure we can identify! Maybe the study of Three Simple Rules might help all of us at points like this. And we can change the outcome to that of doing good!

After all, haven’t we all had those times when we have turned away, only to find our excuses failing to convince us that we have done

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the right thing - while our feeling of compassion burns within us?

Reading the stories of Jesus’ ministry doesn’t help us much. Especially

when we find Jesus never turning anyone one away. One of those stories is our scripture lesson for today. A man with leprosy comes to Jesus for help. This leper had no doubt heard of Jesus healing others and so he seeks out Jesus. He knew it happened for others, so why not him? Read the scripture lesson - Mark 1:40-45.

The leper believed enough to approach Jesus, get down on his knees and begged Jesus, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." It is here where Jesus commanded the leper, "Be made clean!" And indeed, the leprosy left him; let's notice, that Jesus had more in mind. Jesus' desire for us is complete restoration and wholeness. According to the law, the leper needed to present himself to the priests and offer a sacrifice in order to reenter society and be restored to the community. Without that, his leprosy may have been gone but he would remain ceremonially unclean and, therefore, still an outcast.

The leper was given all he needed for full restoration. He just needed to follow through. *(Have you ever wondered if he really did? Or did he settle for just a partial healing?)* Anyway, what we do know is that he got so excited and began to tell everyone about his healing - even though Jesus told him not to. Okay, just a minute! How many of us, if we were miraculously healed, could keep it quiet? After all, who wouldn't tell everyone about such an experience? Can we suppose that Jesus might have wanted the man's new life to speak for itself?

Let's look at this a little deeper. Don't you suppose that the real work of healing comes in integrating those encounters with Christ into everyday life and allowing them to transform our very being? Otherwise, we will probably default to our pre-encounter status quo, as this is so often the easiest thing to do. i.e. - as Davies in our beginning story! Using our fabricated excuses instead of our practice of compassion to do good!

I don't know about you, but this causes me to question how many times Christ has spoken the words, "Be clean!" to me, giving me what I needed for healing, and I, instead settled for a partial healing. How much easier it is to talk about God's healing rather than allow it to really change my life in ways that made the words unnecessary. When this happens, the fulness of God's cleansing is stunted!

So, back to our scripture. Jesus reached out and touched the leper. We might ask, why did he do it? And we know why! It was Jesus' way of practicing compassion - even to the lowly and outcast.

And there are many who would say that is the problem with

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Jesus, he had too much compassion (that might be a subject for another day) for today let us notice that if it were not for Jesus' compassion, none of us would stand a chance of salvation.

-If Jesus were not willing to accept our short comings. . .

-If he were not easy to forgive. . .

-All of us would be on the outside looking in.

And so, what does that compassionate Christ expect of you and me? It is a clear

mandate - **We are to be compassionate too!**

Jesus has given us the power to make a difference in other people's lives by the way we practice our compassion. Someone has said the problem is that we don't use the power we have.

Have you ever thought of compassion as a source of power? Think of it like this. Every time we exercise or practice our sense of compassion, we are making the world a better place for somebody. Think about it - that is power. Oh, we may not be able to touch the leper and make the leper clean. But we can touch the leper of our day, and give them hope for another day.

According to the late Charles Schultz of the comic strip *Peanuts*, "The people who make a difference in your life are not the ones with the most credentials, the most money or the most rewards. They are the ones who care." And that's true. Because of that truth - it opens the door for each and every one of us to have a place in making a difference in our church and our world. Each of us have the power to practice our compassion in Jesus' name. The question is whether we are willing to go beyond the healing Jesus brings to our life and receive the restoration of what we can be, by practicing the power of compassion.

"If you are willing," the man with leprosy begged the Master, "you can make me clean." And here is how Jesus' responded. "Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said, 'Be clean!' My friends, Jesus wants each of us to know and experience to fulness of life when we are willing to go and show ourselves to others in the practice of being compassionate.

Let me conclude with this story. Stephen Covey tells of an unusual experience on the New York subway. While people were sitting quietly in the car, a man entered with his noisy and rambunctious children. The man sat down and closed his eyes as though he was oblivious to his rowdy children. The once quiet subway car was now a disturbing place of chaos. The children's inappropriate behavior was obvious to everyone except their father. Finally, Covey confronted the man about his children. The man opened his eyes and evaluated the situation as if he were unaware of all

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that had transpired: "Oh, you're right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital, where their mother died about an hour ago. I don't know what to think, and I guess they don't know how to handle it either."

Compassion starts when we begin to understand the hurts of others.

We as God's children have the power to practice compassion!