

A GOOD WORD FOR COMPASSION

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

August 6, 2017

Scripture: Psalm 103:8-18; Matthew 14:13-21

On Tuesday last week, David Brooks, one of my on-again, off-again favorite columnist of the *New York Times* published an op-ed piece that was provocative. Its title was “Before Manliness Lost Its Virtue,” and at the risk of losing half the congregation with just that first sentence let me hasten to add that I took exception to Brooks’ repetitive use of that word, “manliness.” What is *manliness* anyway?

An elusive quality that I suspect is more subjective than objective. Is it the burly strong man at the circus? The tattooed brutes I see at my gym? Was Pilate more manly than Jesus just because he was more powerful? Is it a West Virginia coal miner? What is this manliness quality?

Brooks used as his point of departure ancient Greek culture, which had a vision of what made a man a man. We’re not talking anatomy here, but matters of character.

Of course, Greek culture and philosophy were skewed toward the patriarchal, goddesses in mythology notwithstanding. And Brooks’ point was that for the Greeks at their best, good men were hard to find, and at their worst men were, as he put it, “hard to live with... constantly picking fights and engaging in peacock displays.”

To offset these undesirable attributes, Greek culture came to value the quality of magnanimity, the value of self-control, public service, encouragement of others.

Brooks looks for current examples of these qualities in our leaders today and cites John McCain as an example of selfless service, not meant for personal gain. He also invokes the name of Gen. George Marshall who, after World War II, helped to clear the way for the renewal of Western Europe in the wake of its destruction during the war. A lesser man might have gloated at the power and devastation on display in post-war Europe.

I found Brooks’ use of the word manliness to be heavy handed and subject to misinterpretation. After all, if it’s magnanimity that is the value that rounds out manliness, that is a quality found in both sexes, and I would argue that magnanimity is not so much a “manly” quality, as it is a *human* quality that we all might want to cultivate.

The op-ed piece got me thinking about Jesus, oddly enough, and what qualities he possessed which might have been out of synch with his time and culture, not valued nor sought after in the occupied lands of Palestine under Roman rule in the first century. Remember Galilee and Judah were part of the Roman world; and there, the sword spoke loudly. It was a harsh and cruel time and place. Crosses stood outside Jerusalem’s gates where criminals were executed for all to see, a warning against agitation and false hope. Women were to keep silent, and men knew their place, too in occupied Israel.

Along came Jesus, preaching a gospel that was counter-cultural, and counter intuitive if you consider the values of that First Century Roman world.

What Jesus taught could hardly be called culturally appropriate nor was it politically correct in the way we think of it. Jesus urged his followers to “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...” “if anyone strikes you on the right cheek,” he said, “turn the other also; ... if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ...if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.”

Dying on the cross he prayed to God to forgive those who were crucifying him because they could not know what they were doing. Even his advocates adopted his counter cultural values. And listen to how strange on the ear are these standards when held up against today’s ruthless values.

Hear Paul's voice, writing to the Romans, and think of New York City, and think of Washington D.C...

"... love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ...be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ...Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; ...associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves...¹ New York... Washington... are you listening?

These are not the values of our world today which is bent on back biting, revenge, outright lies, meanness of spirit, retaliation, getting even.

In a time when the values of the Anthony Scaramucci's and Stephen Millers are dominant in our culture, we need gentle men's and women's voices to be heard because they are the most reasoned and thoughtful advocates for the poor and the unemployed, and for the sick in our society. When those who are ill and need medical care the most, have, in fact, the least medical coverage or even none at all, then we know that the qualities that Jesus called for in his disciples are missing.

It's not "manliness" that is lacking in our society, at least the kind of manliness that David Brooks held up as the Greek ideal. It's compassion that's lacking. And its long overdue for a good word to be said for it.

I see those folks sitting in the rows behind the President speaking in West Virginia, and what I don't see is compassion, gentleness, meekness, kindness. But rather manliness on steroids, anger, frustration, fear, insecurity.

What is so sorely lacking in our political discussion, from the White House on down in recent months, has been compassion. Instead there is an unabashed concern for self-preservation and political posturing at the price of caring for those on whom our Lord took compassion, people who are sick, people who are alone, people who are poor, people left behind. It is a quality that should not be foreign to a just land, and is especially the concern of the church which must be a voice for the compassionate care of those in need in our society. We are, after all, only as secure a nation as those who are most in need, most broken, and most often ignored.

Hubert Humphrey, Senator and later Vice President from the state of Minnesota and whom I on an occasion or two, once said, "...the moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; those who are in the shadows of life; the sick, the needy and the handicapped. " These may not be the values embraced by many politicians these days, but it is the calling of the church to be a loud and vocal voice advocating for that moral test of government, compassion, calling our nation to the values we cherish as followers of Jesus Christ.

The Biblical word translated as "compassion" is in Latin, *cum patior*, which means, "to suffer with". But of all the definitions that I have read, I like Frederick Buechner's best. He writes,

Compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it's like to live inside somebody else's skin. It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too.²

I suppose that in common parlance and popular secular opinion, Jesus was not much of a man's man, a "manly" man as David Brooks uses that term. He was always going around ladling out compassion on people;

Healing a woman with a hemorrhage who dared to touch him in a crowd,

Blessing a man on a stretcher whose friends lowered him through a hole in the roof so that Jesus could heal him.

Healing a lame fellow who had been sick for 38 years and who lay beside the pool at Bethesda hoping that when the waters stirred he could get someone to help him down into the pool where everyone else was elbowing their way ahead him.

Matthew says of Jesus that he saw all the people gathering on a hillside and he had compassion on them because they looked to him like sheep without a shepherd.

He was, a deeply compassionate man, this Jesus taking pity on others, helping them find their own footing, charging them to pick up their pallet and leaving behind the invalid life.

That was his kind of compassion... bleeding heart, and as it turned out bleeding hands and feet as well.

Buechner was right when he said that compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it's like to live inside somebody else's skin. It is fatal for Jesus, who was compassionate than all of us.

His compassion got the best of him. And he who was the incarnate love of God gave his own life that God's love might be known in our life as well.

I remember as a kid eight years old seeing a movie about the life of Peter Marshall, the well-known Scottish pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. During his ministry, there, Marshall was Chaplain of the Senate as well. I remember the movie "A Man Called Peter" well enough to recall that the congregation on his first Sunday at New York Avenue was portrayed in the movie as a rather small number of opinionated elderly people who weren't quite sure of this young man who had arrived in their pulpit.

And Richard Todd, playing Dr. Marshall did not disappoint their skepticism. He preached a sermon that depicted a Jesus who was "muscular," as he said. Who had calloused, bony carpenter's hands, used to working. A man not afraid of confronting his opponents or challenging the powers that be. A rugged Jesus, according to Dr. Marshall's sermon. A man who hiked the dusty trails of Galilee, and bathed in the waters of the Jordan, and criticized the injustices of the political and religious powers of his day.

In typical Hollywood fashion, the small number of elderly members that day were shocked at such frankness and such a literal depiction of a physical and brave Jesus. But in those days after World War II, I suppose a Hollywood movie would need to depict a pretty macho Jesus considering all the world had seen during that war. No namby-pamby Jesus for the Peter Marshall of this movie, but a Jesus who was a carpenter with splinters and callouses and a strong back.

And just as post World War II America needed a tough Jesus to portray a much-admired Presbyterian preacher, so we need a *compassionate* Jesus today, a Lord of All who can balance the macho-toxic excesses of too much judgment with the compassion of God's love and forgiveness.

I was wandering through cyber-space chasing after an image of what this compassionate quality would be like in the Jesus we so desperately need to recover and about which we need not be embarrassed.

And I came across an amazing video clip on YouTube that I must surely be the last person in the world to discover.³ But there is a judge in Providence, Rhode Island named Frank Caprio. He's eighty years old and he oversees the municipal court in Providence. Small time citations, parking tickets, that kind of thing.

He's been on the bench 32 years and he has always kept in mind the disparity between the all-powerful state and the vulnerability of the individual.

The one clip I saw was the appearance of Andrea Rogers before the judge, a woman who had \$400 in parking tickets and fines that went back to 2004 and 2005. The woman was clearly overwrought,

fearful and confused, throwing herself on the mercy of the court. As a part of her testimony it came out that she had lost her 19-year-old son, the victim of a homicide a year ago at the hands of her uncle.

Her story was complicated, and compounded by the fact that on one or two occasions when she was in the municipal offices trying to settle her parking tickets she was ticketed again because her parking meter ran out of time.

Tickets led to unpaid fines, because she didn't have the money, and one thing after another piled up on her, funeral expenses, grief, unemployment, it was clearly too much for her she said, crying before the judge's bench.

But there was a matter of \$400 in fines owed to the city of Providence. And you can see that the judge was weighing what to do in his mind. And so in light of the woman's traumatic experiences the judge reduced her fine to \$50. And then the judge asked her if she had \$50, and she said, "Yes." She'd brought \$50 in cash.

"And how much will that leave you with?" the judge asked. "\$5" the woman said.

"Well, you're not going to leave here with \$5 dollars" said the judge. "I'll dismiss all the charges, and I'm sure I speak for all the people of Providence when I say that none of us would want to have gone through what you have been through." The woman, of course, was dissolved in tears, and overwhelmed by the judge's compassion.

The court appearance went viral and 13 million people have viewed it. 13 million and one, now.

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I would say compassion; that willingness to feel what another person is feeling is not weakness. It is not being namby-pamby, nor being a soft touch, nor a bleeding heart. It is being brave, in fact, it is the *sometimes fatal* capacity for feeling what it is like to live inside somebody else's skin.

It is, I think, the most deficient quality in public life today, and it is what we are called as Christians to demonstrate as light and hope to the world; to live as Jesus did – compassionately - feeling what it is like to live inside somebody else's skin. That was, you know, what God was doing in Jesus Christ... living inside our skin so that God would know what it is like to be us.

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¹ Romans 12

² Frederick Buechner, **Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC**. New York: Harper & Row, 1973. 15.

³ <http://www.news crunch.in/2017/08/compassionate-us-judge-frank-caprio-becomes-global-celebrity-video.html>