

Loving as Jesus Loved

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Jesus was at Simon the Pharisees house having a meal — for the sake of this discussion let's call it church. A woman walks into church who is not “like everyone else” — a new “visitor” — she is definitely from the wrong side of the town. In fact it says that she actively *lives* a sinful life.

She behaves inappropriately in the eyes of all those present. She is a bit too obvious, a bit too “in your face”. A bit close to Jesus

Everyone feels uncomfortable.

Simon voices everyone's inner discomfort...

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is — that she is a sinner.” (Luke 7:39)

And Jesus does know exactly what kind of woman she is — *yet* he allows her to approach him. To get close, to touch him, to be part of his group. To be intimately connected with him. Despite her sin.

He does not judge her, but he recognises her need and her response, maybe not eloquently voiced in intellectual terms but demonstrated with feeling and intensity. He sees her for who she is. And he “heals her”

Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven — as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little. (Luke 7:47)

and to the woman he says,

Your faith has saved you; go in peace. (Luke 7:50)

Jesus loved the unlovely. He saw the love where we see neediness. He recognised the inner anguish and need for forgiveness where we see an embarrassing lack of protocol and poor behaviour. He didn't wait for her to know all the answers before he healed her.

Jesus once said, “There was once a man who threw a great dinner party and invited many. When it was time for dinner, he sent out his servant to the invited guests, saying, ‘Come on in; the food is on the table.’”

Then they made their excuses. They were busy looking after the kids, going off to work, keeping up with every-day stuff. They would be there on Sunday, for the “meeting”, maybe even in the week for Bible Class. Just not tonight when they had something else on.

When the servant returns to his boss to explain they may have a bit left over, his boss was upset. He told him to go quickly out into the city streets and alleys. “Collect all who look like they need a square meal, all the misfits and homeless and down-and-out you can lay your hands on, and bring them here.” There was still more room and his boss said “Then go to the country roads. Whoever you find, drag them in. I want my house full! Let me tell you, not one of those originally invited is going to get so much as a bite at my dinner party.”

Do we do that?

DRAG them in. From the rough parts of town. From the back of beyond

... to eat

... to be part of our family dinner party.

Not just a bit of soup and a roll. Not just to sit awkwardly on a chair listening to us tell them what we think. Not just to be a “visitor”. To be as important as everyone else. To be the guests of God and his son Jesus

Or do we

DRAG them in

... To listen

... to be told

... to be allowed only into the hall but not our own homes. Not our dinner parties. Not yet.

Them and Us

What do we call people who are not members of our church?

Visitors. Interested friends. Outsiders. Of the world. Strangers. Them.

There can so easily be a “Them and Us” culture. We long to have visitors come into our church but then when they arrive, unless they are like us... “What do we do with them?”

What if they are less well educated and from a lower social class or from another country or culture, do we treat them differently?

I don't think this is always a conscious process. I am not sure we know that we are doing it.

What they definitely are not is "unloved" by God. But it is as if we see them as that. God doesn't love them just yet.

Maybe they don't read or write. Maybe they have no social skills. Maybe they shout out in the service. Maybe they take offence easily.

At this time it is not them, but us, who need to learn how to behave. We need to be taught how to love as Jesus loved. We need to love everyone from the minute they walk in the door, to love them wherever they currently are in their lives.

But so often it is as if we need them to prove themselves, to show up every week, to sit quietly, to listen harder, learn faster, learn it all. Then we can love them just like everyone else.

We are initially cautious, maybe even distrustful, approaching with a sense of pity. Maybe we patronise them a little and dismiss their presence as only coming to see what they can get out of it.

"We have been providing lunch before our seminars for long enough now, they need to learn to come along for the 'spiritual food', we can stop with the meals."

"They don't really understand. Until they grasp the concepts of the promises to Abraham, the fulfilment of the Law, the dry bones prophecy... they cannot be baptised."

"They have been coming for five years now and they still don't get it — it's time to move on."

But how did Jesus see others?

How did he behave when the woman washed his feet, when she came into the church unannounced?

We need to react in the way Jesus reacted. To let others come close, to let them in the church and approach us. He showed compassion towards everyone — not just sympathy or even empathy, and certainly not pity.

Empathy is being able to feel what another person is feeling.

Sympathy is having an understanding of what another person is feeling.

Pity is a kindly, but condescending, sorrow for the suffering or ill fortune of others

But...

Compassion is the willingness not only to non-judgmentally care and understand the suffering of another, but also the desire to act to relieve that suffering.

One quote says, “The core emotional experience of compassion is allowing another's heart to take up temporary residence inside of ours.” Compassion literally means to “suffer with”. To get in and alongside the messy, hurting part of another’s life.

The science of Compassion

A lot of research has gone into how compassion can help. In the book “compassionomics” by Stephen Trzeciak and Anthony Mazzealli, there are many amazing statements.

Brain imaging using functional MRI tests can detect subtle differences in blood flow in the brain and can see high activity in flow when that part of the brain is most active. The experience of empathy, the sense of “feeling”, causes the pain centre of the brain to light up. We experience another's pain. But when we focus on compassion, the “action” element of trying to alleviate suffering, a different area lights up: the reward pathway, associated with positive emotion. Empathy is feeling but compassion is action.

Practising empathy hurts but practising compassion heals. Living compassionately benefits both the sufferer and the giver. If we do not practice compassion then both will be the poorer. Think of the link with Church and those we try to help.

There have been many medical trials covering this topic, cited in the book:

- A compassionate approach pre-surgery from anaesthetists led to a 50% reduction in requirements for opiates post surgery, and shorter hospital stays.
- Patients randomly assigned to compassionate palliative care approaches survived 30% longer.
- HIV patients treated in a targeted compassionate environment had 33% greater adherence to therapy.
- Twenty-one randomised controlled trials in the US demonstrated significant improvement in service-user depression, anxiety, distress and wellbeing with a targeted compassionate therapy approach.
- In Canada a randomised controlled trial of the homeless presenting in Accident and Emergency (A+E) showed that those in the compassion arm of the study were 33% less likely to return to A+E in the next 30 days.

There is evidence for the power of touch from many trials:

- Reduced pain and reduced cortisol induced stress in post operative patients.
- Reduced rate of complications and hospital length of stay in premature infants
- Reduced pain levels in multiple studies
- Reduced fatigue and pain in cancer patients
- Increased haemoglobin levels in anaemic studies
- Reduced restlessness and cortisol variation in nursing home residents with dementia.

Dr James Doty at Stanford University is the founder of the Centre for Compassion and Altruism. He writes,

As human beings, we will inevitably encounter suffering at some point in our lives. However, we also have evolved very specific social mechanisms to relieve that pain: altruism and compassion. It is not just receiving compassion that relieves our pain. Stephanie Brown, professor at SUNY Stony Brook University and the University of Michigan, has shown that the act of experiencing compassion and helping others actually leads to tremendous mental and physical well-being for us as well. While survival of the fittest may lead to short-term gain, research clearly shows it is survival of the kindest that leads to the long-term survival of a species. It is our ability to stand together as a group, to support each other, to help each other, to communicate for mutual understanding, and to cooperate, that has taken our species this far. Compassion is an instinct. Recent research shows that even animals such as rats and monkeys will go through tremendous effort and cost to help out another of its species who is suffering. We human beings are even more instinctually compassionate; our brains are wired for compassion. (The Science of Compassion, 2012)

As the compassion of Jesus led to healing, so it should prompt us to do the same, to want to act. To do something.

Preaching and Healing

A definition of healing is *the process of making or becoming sound or healthy again.*

We can learn from Jesus' dealings with his disciples about how this works out in practice.

Jesus sent out his disciples early on in his ministry to preach the Kingdom of God and to heal the sick. This encompasses two main concepts:

1. Preaching the Kingdom of God: the life we lead and the wonderful message of hope;
2. Healing the sick: making something whole again.

And Jesus does the same.

When the disciples had come back from this trip away, Jesus decided to take them away with him for a debrief and chat about what had happened. But... the crowds learned about it and followed him. He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing. (Luke 9:10)

He did exactly what he had asked the disciples to do. He didn't say to the crowd, "The members of the church need a bit of time away, on their own. We know you visitors are coming for the healing bit, we will be back next Sunday if you need us." It says that he *welcomed* them, *spoke* to them and *healed* them. The disciples had to wait. Their teaching came second to the need to tell others about the Kingdom and to heal them.

What did Jesus' work at preaching and healing look like?

When John's disciples were sent to (essentially) ask who Jesus was, his reply was all action. It encompassed those two actions: healing the sick, and telling them the Good News.

Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. (Luke 7:21)

We are all broken. All sick. We all need healing, and at different times we need it more than at other times. Let us not fool ourselves that we are any healthier than anyone else.

The more broken a person is, the more God has to work with. The more space he can fill.

And, whilst we require our own healing, we are here to be Christ's healing arms and hands on earth to others. Whilst we are actively involved in loving people back to health, they should feel as much part of our family as anyone else. They should feel as loved as every other member of our church. We should not make distinction between any person. All are God's children.

But we can make it so hard to join this family, make it feel like a test, an exam, an educational exercise. We can make people feel they are not good enough, clever enough, Christadelphian enough, to make that leap to commit to a life in Jesus.

Archbishop John Santamu once said, “If you squeeze a lemon you get lemon juice — if you squeeze a Christian, do you get Jesus?”

I think too often we squeeze a Christadelphian and get “The Bible”. Don’t get me wrong, the Bible is one of the fundamental ways we can learn who Jesus was. After all, he is the fulfilment of the Bible message. But the *purpose* of the Bible is to use it to become more Christ-like, to demonstrate that behaviour in our lives, to become Christ to those around us.

Jesus used parables. He explained the Bible to people around him in a way they could understand. And in order to be able to simplify a story and get the salient points across clearly, we have to understand it fully and clearly ourselves. This is not dumbing down the Bible. It is not overlooking the detail. It is tailoring it to our audience. We have all been given varying skills of intellect and understanding. The role of the well educated is to be able to inform others so that their lives are transformed but their minds are not confused, that they do not walk away feeling stupid or inferior.

Practical Healing

We may often think we are good at Preaching the Kingdom of God. But what are we like at healing the sick?

In our experience, we have found that those who have come to us for comfort have often been wounded and scarred by their past. They may struggle to trust, or feel undeserving of love. Sometimes they lash out. Often they reject help. They are scared to open up, scared to let us in, scared we will let them down. They feel that they are not good enough, not clever enough, not strong enough.

How easy it is to give the impression of superiority, often unwittingly.

It is up to us to remain constant, always there, not taking offence, ready to love them, willing to share our own weakness, our own faults and our own struggles with our faith.

It has been shown scientifically that to have an emotionally stable adult in the life of a victim of previous trauma, especially in childhood, helps recovery and healing going forwards. Shouldn’t our church be that emotionally stable adult. We are called to be part of that team in our church.

So we know compassion works, but how did Jesus do it?

When Jesus sees people, he has compassion on them. On several occasions Matthew says that he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd

.... and he healed their sick,

.... and had Compassion for them and did not want to send them away hungry,

.... and had Compassion on them and he touched their eyes.

We need to reach out. It is not enough to expect people to come to us.

We need to touch, get close enough to feel the pain and need in others. To be at a distance is to observe suffering, but not to take part in it.

We need to go out, to drag people in, to something they want to come to. To people who need a meal, need a chat, need love.

Once they are here we need to feed them and clothe them and accept them.

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. (Luke 5:31)

If you just love other members of your church (and then only the nice ones), where is the grace in that? We all love people who love us. And if you help out those who you know will help you out? Big deal! If you happily lend money to someone who you know can pay you back — not much of a challenge?

How about you try loving those who are fighting against God? Help them out. Lend them a fiver without expecting anything back. Not even a word of thanks.

It will be worth it to feel a real part of God's family. Because God is kind to everyone. Be kind and good towards everyone, having a real desire to help them, just as your Father God is kind and good.

When the disciples were sent out by Jesus, he gave them this instruction.

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. (Matt 28:19–20)

When people come into our church we need to help them to become disciples too. They cannot remain visitors forever, they cannot be “them”, they need to become “us”. They need to

be servants of God. Empowered to undertake their own healing. To be valued as fellow workers for Christ.

We cannot wait for them to become more knowledgeable, to know it all. The gospel is about setting people free, but we choose to bind them, figuratively tying their hands until *we* think they are ready. We cannot think we are in control of the salvation of others! We are here to lighten the burden and ease the load. To be facilitators of God's grace.

We have been challenged over the past ten years in my church to see our role in society through different eyes — and it has been an amazing journey. Currently we have 15 regular attenders at our seminar. We feed them all. We try to know them all. We have another 10 or more we see from time to time and keep in contact with twice a month. We don't get the stock answer to our question of, "How are you?" as being, "Good thanks," all covered up in fine clothes and good behaviour. We get real answers — benefit claim forms, requests for help with bailiffs, help with no water or heating, debt issues, traumatic pasts, loneliness, inadequacy, sadness.

But we also have overwhelming gratitude and a sense of growing trust. A recognition of being part of a family who cares about them. A sense of belonging. So, let us strive to make more disciples, to grow as a church, as Jesus commanded us.

Commitment to Compassion

Compassion can improve our lives and the lives of those we are in contact with in a number of ways. We could be a Church that heals and restores. It has been proven that:

1. Compassion can reduce risk of heart disease by boosting the positive effects of the Vagus Nerve, which helps to slow our heart rate. *We can be a calming influence on people's troubled lives.*
2. Compassion makes people more resilient to stress and strengthens the immune response. *We can be a strength in times of difficulty.*
3. Compassionate people are more socially adept, making them less vulnerable to the negative health effects of loneliness. *We can be a family to the lonely.*
4. Compassionate societies — those that take care of their most vulnerable members, assist other nations in need, and have children who perform more acts of kindness — are the happiest societies. *We can be that compassionate society.*

Compassionately we reach out to others in their suffering.

Compassionately we reach out to help and lift up, to heal, to restore, to make well again.

Jesus lifted others up, quite literally at times. He raised people from a position of inferiority to one of equal standing. Every time someone reached out for Jesus, not only did he *always* respond, but when he left, they *always* felt better for it.

Imagine if that was said of us.

Then he turned to the host. "The next time you put on a dinner, don't just invite your friends and family and rich neighbours, the kind of people who will return the favour. Invite some people who never get invited out, the misfits from the wrong side of the tracks. You'll be—and experience—a blessing. They won't be able to return the favour, but the favour will be returned—oh, how it will be returned!—at the resurrection of God's people."
(Luke 14:12-14)