The Gift of Compassion

Matthew 5:7; Matthew 18:21-35

I’m having mixed feelings about the Beatitudes. It’s wonderful to know that living in the way of Jesus brings blessings, but did Jesus have to make living in his way so hard…? I mean,

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. (Matthew 5:7)

Merciful, in a world as conflicted as ours? We’d never survive. Bad guys crush merciful ones. And yet something in us keeps hoping ….

There’s a book review in last week’s The Economist that begins,

IN an age of partisan divides it has become popular to assert that the wounds of the world would heal if only people made the effort to empathise more with each other. If only white police officers imagined how it feels to be a black man in America; if only black Americans understood the fears of the man in uniform; if only Europeans opposed to immigration walked a mile in the shoes of a Syrian refugee; if only tree-hugging liberals knew the suffering of the working class.¹

Those hopes are widely shared, but the author of the book under review is not impressed. He disapproves of empathy. It’s inadequate: too soft; too squishy: he calls “sugary soda, tempting and delicious and bad for us. In its stead, [the author] prescribes a nutritious diet of reason, compassion and self-control.”

It’s not that empathy is bad, the author argues, it’s just insufficient. Empathy is easily manipulated, by a tug at the heart strings. We need to combine heart and mind—empathy that goes deeper and becomes compassion.

And that brings us to our scripture. When Jesus says ‘blessed are the merciful, he is evoking one of the defining characteristics of God. The word Matthew uses here for ‘merciful’ appears frequently in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. It’s frequently translated ‘compassionate.’ Psalm 103:8 declares

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love …

Compassion; mercy. This defining characteristic of God appears frequently in the ministry of Jesus: in Matthew 9:36,

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them …

... Jesus then feeds the 5000. Then there is his treatment of the woman caught committing adultery: “Has no one condemned you? ... Neither do I condemn you. Go on your way, and from now on do not sin again.” All the way through the dying thief, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Well, you may be thinking, Fine for Jesus; he can’t expect us to show such mercy; not in our world.... He does.

The current issue of the Presbyterian Outlook has an article by Jeanne Bishop. She’s a Presbyterian elder and works in Chicago in The Cook County Public Defender’s office while serving as an adjunct law professor. Some years ago, her 25-year-old sister and husband were murdered six months before their first child was due. The murderer was a 16-year-old boy. Bishop writes, “He showed no remorse, made no apology, took no responsibility.” He was sentenced to life without parole, and she notes, “That sentence means you go to prison and you die there…”

“I supported that sentence when he first received it. Over time, though, God changed my heart... I no longer believe in the merciless sentence of life without parole for juveniles. I wrote to David Biro telling him I had forgiven him and offering to visit him. He wrote me back a 15-page letter confessing to the murders and making a heartfelt apology. I went to visit David in prison. I am visiting him still. The story of our reconciliation was broadcast on television.

Actually, on Christmas night. Next day she received an email:

You are a seriously screwed up woman. Your arguments ring hollow. Biro needs to be [I'll soften the language, sexually violated] every day of his worthless life, before he burns in hell.

Bishop comments,

Well then. This is a variation on a message I get a lot. People never change. He is evil and irredeemable. He got what he deserved. He made his bed, let him lie in it.... I’ve gotten messages like this from people who call themselves Christians—that is, followers of Jesus Christ.

Bishop rightly questions their understanding of Jesus. It doesn’t square, for instance, with the parable of the prodigal son and the mercy he received. She pondered that parable and then got its point.

2 John 8:11. Although this story does not appear in the most ancient manuscripts of John’s gospel (other manuscripts have it in Luke), most scholars believe it dropped from some manuscripts because monks found it dangerously open to misunderstanding and abuse. However the story was not entirely lost because it was so typical of Jesus and his compassion.
3 Luke 23:43
Love goes first. It doesn’t wait. It doesn’t tally up what one person owes to another, then waits for payment in full before there can be healing of the breach. It reaches out and embraces; it urges redemption and reconciliation; it celebrates restoration and return.4

She forgave him. She was merciful. Now mercy is not always that dramatic, but it is often almost as difficult. C S Lewis somewhere admits it took him 20 years to forgive a wrong he had received.

Now, hopefully, we’ll never be asked to dive so deeply into compassion That’s mercy in its Sunday best. Mercy also comes however, in everyday clothing. Forgiving, or simply being kind.

Bill Hybels once saw an old lady struggling with her grocery bags. He offered to carry them to her apartment.

It was unexpectedly complicated. The driveway to her apartment complex had been seal coated and was roped off. They had a detour of more than a hundred yards to get to the apartments and her groceries were very heavy. When he finally got the lady and her groceries home, he shook her hand to leave. He remembers,

The woman left her bony, wrinkled hand in mine long after the handshake was done. “I will believe to my dying day that God sent you to help me just now,” she said.

Hybel’s reaction was:

The whole deal felt so inglorious ... the longer than expected trek, the lack of any earth-shattering results—and yet as I walked away from the apartment complex, something in my spirit felt right. God had whispered a simple instruction my way, and this time I have actually slowed down enough to listen. There is no greater feeling in the world than to hear—and heed—God’s voice.5

Do you hear God’s voice? Jesus said, Blessed are the merciful ...

The wisdom of the world says we’d never survive if we’re merciful. The wisdom of Christ says we’ll never survive if we’re not!

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