

“... and boundless compassion for all people.”

*A sermon preached on Mark 9:38-50 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on September 30, 2018*

One of the great gifts of my work is getting to hear stories from many of you, and I share one such story with you today. You’ve heard that story of the woman walking across a bridge one day, who saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. So she ran over and said, “Sir, stop! don’t do it!”

“Why shouldn’t I?” he said.

The woman said, “Well, there’s so much to live for!”

He said, “Like what?”

She said, “Well ... are you religious or atheist?”

The man said, “Religious.”

And she said, “Me too! Are you Christian or Buddhist?”

The man said, “Christian.”

She said, “Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?”

He said, “Protestant.”

The woman said, “Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?”

He said, “Baptist!”

She was so excited and said, “Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?”

He said, “Baptist Church of God!”

She said, “It’s amazing! I am too! Are you original Baptist Church of God, or are you the reformed Baptist Church of God?”

He said, “Reformed Baptist Church of God!”

She said, “Oh it’s a miracle, I am too! But wait — are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?”

The man said, “Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!”
And she said, “Die, heretic scum,” and pushed him right off.¹

I.

We hear a bit of this in our daily life, do we not? And we hear a bit of those ideas and that spirit from our disciples who we find today in the Gospel of Mark, as we have the past couple of weeks, haggling with Jesus about their role and what it means. They’ve found someone who is casting out demons, they say, which was a common remedy in that 1st century age of all manner of mental and emotional afflictions. Apparently this person was doing so ‘in your name,’ they tell him. But ‘rest assured Jesus,’ they seemed to say, ‘we tried to stop him from doing so *because he was not following us.*’

Did you catch that? The problem the disciples had with this man was not what he was doing in Jesus’s name, nor was it about whether or not that was right, but rather that the healers were not following ‘us’ -- meaning them, the disciples. As one preacher says about these disciples, “apparently it is not enough to be a follower of Jesus; you have to be a certain kind of follower [like the reformed Baptist of 1879 or 1915!], one that toes the line, that shares their theological commitments, that conforms to the disciples’ expectations, perhaps that is therefore under the oversight or control of the disciples.”²

¹ With gratitude to Rev. Garrett Vickrey for sharing with me this story, and for Rev. Richard Groves for reminding me of its origin! Comedian Emo Phillips is said to be the one who created it.

² David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/09/pentecost-19-b-accepting-a-cup-of-water/>.

I don't know how they were anticipating Jesus to respond, but I bet they didn't expect him to admonish them as he did. "Don't stop him," Jesus said, "for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us! For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward." I hear in this some subtext from Jesus: disciples, it's not your job to divide them from us, to assign meaning to some and not others, to determine who is for or against God based on your parameters, to decide who bears and receives compassion as straightforward as a cup of water in my name.

So on this day where we finish up our monthlong exploration of our church's vision statement — "we are a community in the heart of the city called by Jesus to practice bold love of God and neighbor and boundless compassion for all people?" — how might this story from Jesus give us a glimpse into doing just that?

II.

Today we look at that final claim: "Boundless compassion for all people." It's a nice claim, right? But what, I wonder, in this particular time and place — and into the future! — what might this mean for us? Let's break it down a bit.

First — *boundless*. Throughout this past week, capital campaign small group gatherings have begun, and a number of you have participated in order to talk together about this moment in the life of the church. In each gathering, Leslie Lowdermilk has asked the group to consider the word

'boundless' and say more about what it means to them. Your answers have been spot on: 'liberated,' 'no limits,' 'endless,' 'outside the lines,' 'infinite.'

Then — *compassion*. You know, many small translations and details I learned in seminary have fallen out of sharp focus in my memory, but this particular verb used in the New Testament to describe Jesus's posture towards people he encounters is one that has stayed with me. The Greek word for 'to have compassion' translates quite literally to mean 'a churning of the gut.'³ The root word here comes from the noun "splanxna," which refers to the human insides: the bowels, heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys, all central sites in those days for human emotion. So 'to have compassion' with another invited a visceral, bodily response in your gut to 'have sympathy with, to suffer with, to have passion alongside' another. Henri Nouwen once said: "Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anger. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human."⁴

Boundless compassion for all people. That last part is pretty straightforward — *all people* means all people, not just those who are like us,

³ Several helpful places helped me with the Greek work *anexichniaston* this week. My New Testament class notes from Dr. Diane Lipsett, 10/22/07, were helpful, as were the following: Pete Peery, "Mark 6:30-44," *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, p182; Dan Clendenin, "Journey with Jesus," <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20130603JJ.shtml>; and Karoline Lewis, "Dear Working Preacher," <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3656>.

⁴ Donald McNeill, Douglass Morrison, and Henri Nowen, *Compassion*, p4.

those who we like, those we understand, those whose actions we affirm, those we admire, those we voted for, those we follow. All means all.

So with this understanding, to *practice boundless compassion for all people* means to me that we covenant to enter into a regular habit or exercise of actively, viscerally letting the sufferings and needs of others hit us to our very core, such that we respond to all people from the inside out.

As I have mulled over this particular part of our vision statement, this calling of God we have felt and articulated in our vision statement, I can't help but to wonder: *do we fully understand what we are getting ourselves into with this?* Don't get me wrong — it is a beautiful thing when anyone sees the needs of another, someone who sees a person whose mental, emotional, spiritual, or physical need is plain and responds directly with the compassion of Christ. We are to do just that, to encounter those like the man with a demon who needed healing, those who merely need a cup of water, those whose need is clear and respond with kindness and sacrifice. Thanks be to God that I see these kind of moments happening among us, led by you all the time. But I think if we're serious about this commitment to practice boundless compassion for all people right now, in 2018 and into the future, I think this asks us to go a step further, to move beyond 'meeting needs' to "full immersion in the condition of being human," endlessly seeking ways of allowing the sufferings of everyone — everyone! — hit us right in the gut in such ways that we can't help but to respond.

Honestly, I can't think of a more apt and necessary posture to assume as followers of Jesus in this particular day and age. For it seems to me that boundless compassion even amongst our Christian family to find with one

another, and it is perhaps the opposite of the seething anger and rancorous division on full display throughout our land. This week, headlines and hallways have echoed with fury coming from all sides. Tribalism – the spirit of marking the boundaries of one’s tribe by party or privilege and hewing closely within – has caused Americans of all stripes and sides to now view their political opponents not as fellow Americans with differing views, but as enemies to be vanquished.⁵ Studies are showing us that as much as we long to stop being so angry with each other, and for our politics to be free of anger, we can’t get the anger to stop.⁶ All we can seem to find in our collective gut is a boiling pit of rage. And with even the best of intentions, we find ourselves looking across the aisle or to someone on the other side of an opinion we hold dearly, thinking, “if you aren’t for us, you’re against us!”

So what might it look like to practice boundless compassion for all people in such a divided season of our common life together? What would it demand of us to practice it especially with those whose difference from us, at least makes them hard to handle, but at worst, turns them in our eyes into an enemy to vanquish. There’s no doubt that it’s hard to practice boundless compassion when faced with a person with an acute physical or emotional need, but I wonder in this day and age if it is even possible to practice boundless compassion with our family member whose cultural views make us rage, or our random friend from high school whose posts on Facebook

⁵ Amy Chua, "The Threat of Tribalism," *The Atlantic*: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/the-threat-of-tribalism/568342/>

⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/americas-anger-paradox/2018/09/11/2bc9af7e-b231-11e8-aed9-001309990777_story.html?utm_term=.28a7aaf44ab6

prompt our vigorous opposition, or our colleague whose small annoyances have become major roadblocks for us to see past. What will it take?

III.

Gutted.

That was the word I used to describe to a friend my spirit on Thursday after watching part of the senate judicial committee's hearing that, under the most impossible glare, captured two people's account. Millions of our fellow Americans tuned in and heard the testimonies: of a woman recounting her experience of sexual violence as a teenager and the suffering that has followed her ever since, and of a man who has been hurt in the face of unprecedented vitriol and defense of his life's legacy. And regardless of how they vote, politicians and pundits alike found agreement that these two have endured the unimaginable, their lives and pasts cracked open for all of America to judge and to parse.

I think I felt so gutted because I, like millions around the country, heard elements of my own story in theirs. Her story was familiar to me, as I remember the time my boundaries were transgressed by another, resulting in a persistent trauma that dulls over the years but never goes away. His story was familiar to me too, as I recall the times I've felt unfairly wronged or blamed, times that protectiveness of my family or my work has brought tears to my eyes. As they spoke and as I listened, my response wasn't merely emotional; it was physical, visceral, involuntary. My brow dampened, my hands shook, my heart felt as if it would beat right out of my chest, and my stomach churned like it has throughout the years when feeling emotions too powerful for words.

As much as I wish I could, I'm not going to stand here and claim to you that I was practicing boundless compassion that day. But in the days since, I've hoped and wondered if that's what I didn't even realize I was trying to reach for, however imperfectly. Because if a shade of compassion is, as Nouwen says, the "full immersion in the condition of being human," then it demands we see one another as fully human to do so. For the moment we are unable to look through our difference and disagreement to see the inherent personhood, value, belovedness, and worth in all people (*all people!*) – even *and especially* those whose behavior or opinions we abhor – that becomes the moment that we have forgotten our role, missed the point, and abandoned the crux of the gospel. We become like those misguided disciples, pointing to the other side and saying, 'Lord, we tried to stop him, because he was not following US!', forgetting in our righteousness that it's not about us, it's about Jesus. It's not about who we are, it's about who God is.

Now lest I be misunderstood, let me be clear: I am not suggesting that in order to practice boundless compassion towards another, particularly those with whom you may have insurmountable difference, that it means affirming what they do or say. Nor am I suggesting that there is no place for righteous anger, or working for justice, or holding accountable those who have committed acts that inflict harm on another. No.

But what I am saying is that if our sense of the world, of right and wrong, of the common good, and of the Christian faith takes away our ability to look at someone with whom we disagree wholeheartedly and see them as a beloved child of God who is valued and worthy of our co-suffering and compassion, then woe is the eye that cause us to stumble. Would that we

tear it out, Jesus said, and enter the kingdom of God with one eye than two and be thrown into the place where our fires of anger will never be quenched.

IV.

Jesus ends this passage with what seem like simple words: “Be at peace with one another.” If you’re like me in some of my more cynical days, you think, “there’s no way! We can’t do that.” But we remember the words of Frederick Buechner that “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 ... for me until there is peace ... finally for you too.”⁷

Brothers and sisters, into this world we are called to go as agents of peace, as those who practice boundless compassion for all people – in order that we might be at peace with one another.

It is costly, and as Buechner says, it can be sometimes fatal.

But it can change the world.

May it be so! Amen.

⁷ Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith*, p65.