

## THE COST OF COMPASSION

Mark 8:31-38

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Thursday afternoon my “work” entailed one of my absolute favorite job duties - paying a home visit to one of the very newest members of our church family, in this case a little peanut of a baby girl, less than four weeks old. This little girl’s dad grew up in this church and I performed her parents’ wedding. They moved into their new home just a week before she was born. Yet her mom was calm and happy.

Just the night before, I had been sitting in the chapel during our parenting class, listening to Mark Spaetzel give an outstanding presentation about what parents today need to know about drugs and alcohol - he described in detail the current substance abuse trends among junior high and high school students.

If parents knew, before they conceived or adopted children, just all that parenting would entail, one wonders if we might indeed have zero population growth...if you received a list of all of the challenges you would face as a parent, all of the costs involved in parenting, a list that also included the incomparable joys of being a mother and father...it would seem overwhelming, and I wonder how many of us would take the leap of faith into the parenting adventure.

But that’s not how it works, is it? Not every decision is based on logic. Not every decision begins in the brain. Some of our most important life decisions begin in the heart. And thank goodness for that. What’s best, of course, is when head and heart come together. We make our wisest decisions when we are most attuned with our whole bodies. When we pay attention to the butterflies in our stomach, the instincts that let us know whether a situation is safe or dangerous. We are wonderfully made, and our senses can help lead us towards healthy lifestyle choices.

When you fall in love, researchers tell us, your senses are involved. You are attracted to a person's eyes and smile, but also their scent. The vast majority of people fall in love first with their heart, letting their emotions run the first several laps. Only later do our minds catch up and we begin to analyze our relationships and determine whether they are right for us and how we want to proceed.

Jesus tries to tell his disciples, his followers, that following him will not be an easy life. In our passage for today, Jesus says to them, "This is what is going to happen to me. I'm going to suffer." Jesus predicts his death and resurrection. Every time he does this, the disciples seem stunned. They can't comprehend. Now we can relate a bit. After all, who can comprehend resurrection? It's hard enough to comprehend resurrection 2,000 years after the first Easter. How can we possibly expect Jesus' friends to grasp it before the first Easter? Not only that. They can't believe that Jesus would suffer. They don't want to believe it. Just like Mark Spaetzel told us Wednesday night, parents often stick their heads in the sand and don't want to acknowledge signs that their teens might be in trouble. Denial is powerful. The disciples like riding on the popularity train. They enjoy the way people look at them when they stride into town with Jesus. They don't want to think about the fact that following Jesus will also lead them into times of difficulty.

Jesus wants them to understand, to be prepared, but perhaps they aren't using their brains. Just like we all are at the beginning of a relationship, perhaps the disciples are infatuated. They're following their hearts.

When I talk to prospective new members of this church, which is another of my favorite job duties, I want them to know what church membership means. I want them to understand everything they can about this congregation and about the United Church of Christ. I don't ever want someone to feel like there's been a bait and switch, that they signed up for something and then the rules changed. I want, as much as possible, for people to make a decision to join the

church with both their hearts and their heads. So I talk to people about the joys of being a part of a church family. What it means to have people who walk the faith journey with you, who share your values. How helpful it is, when you are a parent with young children, to know other parents with young children. How helpful it is, when you are in the sandwich generation, caring for your older parents while also caring for your own children or grandchildren, to know others in similar situations. How it feels to go into surgery knowing that a whole congregation is praying for you. I tell them that they will feel a sense of hope when they participate in the mission activities sponsored by this church. And I also tell them that there are responsibilities involved. We ask for gifts of time, talent and treasure. We understand that people have different abilities to give at different stages of life. There are stages when you have more time, and there are stages when you have more money. We respect that we're not all in the same circumstance. We also expect everyone to do what they can, and we know that your church involvement will mean more to you the more you give and participate.

Whether you are a new member joining today, or whether you've been a member here fifty years, it's worth stopping every now and then to consider just how odd and countercultural this whole enterprise is. The message we receive out in the world sounds like this. "Worry about yourself. Do the things that make you happy. You deserve to pamper yourself." A message like that leads to certain actions. We think more about ourselves than about others. We don't consider how our lifestyle choices are affecting others. We focus intently on what we think will make us happy. And sometimes, we are sorely disappointed. We believe the messages we're given. We believe that a new car will make us happy. Or a bigger house. We believe that a little plastic surgery will lead to a happier marriage. Or that spending more money on a vacation will make our family problems disappear. The problem with the message we receive out in the world is that it all focuses on externals. There is something you can ingest, inject, or buy that will make you a happier person.

The church has a completely different message. The key to a more meaningful life is found inside us. Listen to the message God is giving you. It's why we practice a moment of silence every Sunday. Don't fill all that time every week with giving God your prayer list. Spend a little time listening. Pay attention to the ways God is nudging you. What news stories tug at your heart? What causes do you feel compelled to become involved in? God speaks to us, God is calling us to listen to our own voice of inner wisdom. It doesn't mean we ignore our own needs. It means that we best fulfill them by a life of generosity and service and compassion.

The message of the church is deeply countercultural. We ask you to give away your most precious possessions: your time and your money. Not all of each, of course not. But enough so that you notice. Enough so that it feels good.

There is a second message prevalent in our world today. It is more subtle, but it's there. It's a message that says, "Yes, there are a lot of problems, but there's really not anything any of us can do about them." I don't think anyone is intentionally promoting that message, but notice how often it's there. It's there in the prevalence of bad news stories, and the shortage of stories about good news and progress. And it leads right back to the first. If there's nothing you can do about the world's problems, well, then, you might as well just invest your money into that new boat or that expensive fancy camp for your kids or shoes or going out to eat more...the list is endless. It's very seductive. We're told, in so many subliminal ways, "You work hard. You deserve to take care of yourself."

It's not easy to live the Christian life. It requires living with open hearts, open minds, and open hands. Open hearts to receive the hurt of those close to us and those in need throughout the world. Open minds because our world is constantly changing, and yesterday's solutions might not work today. Open hands, because what we have is not ours alone. Don't grasp everything you own so tightly. We have received much and we are called to pass it along.

It's not an easy way to live, but let me ask you this? Who are the people you admire the most? Take a moment to think about it. It could be someone you know personally, a friend or relative. It could be someone famous, past or present. Chances are, it's someone you admire because of their character. Because of their extraordinary compassion or courage or the way they have faced adversity.

It's tempting, I know it is, to cocoon ourselves into a world of comfort and pleasure. And we all need a little comfort and pleasure from time to time. I would be a hypocrite if I didn't tell you that I'm leaving for vacation this afternoon. All lives need balance and rest and fun. But if we live in the cocoon of comfort and pleasure most of the time, we will end our lives with regret. We will leave the world a worse place than we found it.

Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" What does it mean, in Avon Lake in 2018, to take up the cross? It means giving of time, talent and treasure. Living with open hearts, open minds and open hands. Finding time, especially in these forty days of Lent, to listen to what God is saying to you. Paying attention to the ways God is nudging you to make a difference for good.

We do it, not because we want to be labeled as good and moral people, but because we are in love with the one who speaks these words. As I heard another preacher say this week, "Christianity is not behavior modification, it is soul transformation." It all starts with love. You don't kiss that newborn baby on the top of its head over and over again because some parenting book tells you to. You do it naturally and enthusiastically, out of love. What is God's compassion for you calling you to do in these forty days of compassion?