



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Kingdom Compassion" - Hope Restored Sermon Series

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Today we continue in our sermon series of Hope Restored. Let me begin by saying that this should be one of the easiest sermons I have ever preached. Because it parallels so much of the story of the feeding of the 5,000 that Pastor Dan preached on some weeks back. So I guess I should just say, 'Remember what Pastor Dan said in that sermon back then? Well, Ditto here. Now let's all go home early.' How many of you are all for that?

Today our sermon comes from Mark 8:1-10 and it says: *In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, Jesus called his disciples and said to them, ² "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. ³ If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance."*

⁴ His disciples replied, "How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?" ⁵ He asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven."⁶ Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the

ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. ⁷ They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed.

⁸ They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. ⁹ Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. ¹⁰ And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

Now to be sure there are a lot of things in common with the previous story of feeding the five thousand in Mark chapter six. *Both* stories occur in deserted settings. *Both* emphasize Jesus' compassion on the crowds. *Both* have bread and fish as the food they eat. *In both* "the people ate" with plenty leftovers and *both* conclude with Jesus taking a boat trip to the other side of sea of Galilee. Despite all these commonalities we still have in this story a few things that are uniquely challenging and inspiring, particularly about the issue of Compassion.

I know by this point in the gospel Jesus has done so many miracles that we can be a little 'ho hum' about what is happening here. Jesus is feeding thousands of people out of a few loaves of bread and a few fish, Ho hum. Been there, done that, I'm getting bored already! But if we look at a few *nuances* unique to this story here it can really stretch our souls to greater things.

First off, remember *where* Jesus is at that point. As Pastor Chris Pan preached last week, Jesus in Gentile territory in an area called the Decapolis on the Eastern side of the Sea of Galilee and likely because of a couple of miracles He did with some citizens of that area (e.g. a delivering a man possessed by many demons and healing the deaf mute from last week) a "Great Crowd" comes out to see Jesus.

So why might this be significant to point out? Because when you consider *how* these Gentiles lived and especially *how* they worshipped, this miracle of immense compassion and generosity to such people is no small thing.

Let me ask you this, when you picture the Gentile crowd what kind of pictures comes to mind? Perhaps you picture your non-Christian neighbors on your street, who might to go a Bon Dance once a year at a temple in Honolulu. But the folks whom Jesus was teaching were as *pagan* as the day is long.

They worshipped all kinds of idols and had all kinds of ungodly rituals. They may have been wearing all kinds of pagan amulets or symbols on their body as they came to listen to Jesus. In fact, they probably looked a little more like these folks or doing these things than your average local neighbor (*picture of Hindu people worshipping idols*).

I should also point out there is a really good chance that they are not necessarily there because they want to be Christians. They likely haven't heard enough of the gospel to get that far. It is more than likely that those with a Hellenistic and/or Gentile worldview from that area would have thought of Jesus merely as another "god" to add to the pantheon of gods they already believed in, or perhaps they saw Jesus as a demigod, or some powerful holy man who can heal.

In all probability they are not likely coming out because now they all want to become Monotheists. To the Gentile monotheism was odd, at best, and it was even mocked by people in their culture. Bottom line, there could have been all kinds of less than noble and

Christian reasons as to why they were listening to Jesus.

I don't know if you have ever lived in a culture that centers on idol worship, but it is drastically different from our culture. I'm not talking about a culture that has idols, but a culture centered on them.

I was fortunate to live in Nepal for a few months when it was the world's only Hindu kingdom and while I was there I saw idols literally by the millions. I know this will sound incredibly politically incorrect, but the worship practices that I saw were so hopeless and often dehumanizing, sometimes it was disturbing.

I *constantly* saw people trying to appease as many gods as necessary to relieve their suffering and deep fears that they carried around with them. People were putting their hope in wooden and stone images; putting their hope in various animals, from cows, to snakes, to all kinds of things. Some even put their hope even in trees.

While in Nepal I met a woman who shared with me how she *married* a large tree in her village to earn merit toward her Karma. You see each village in Nepal has at least two sacred trees - a female tree and a male tree.

One night the female tree was struck down in a storm. So after some thought this woman stepped forward to be *the* spouse of the tree. The village had a big ceremony and everything. She told me she was

thrilled to do this because of all the merit it brought her. Think about this for a second. This woman was willing to forgo love and marriage to a real human being and instead be married to an inanimate object, just so she could earn the favor of the gods and make her life a little more bearable now and in the lives she thought she would live in the future.

Don't get me wrong; I met all kinds of beautiful and wonderful and nice people in that amazing country. But they were beautiful and wonderful and nice people with deep anxieties and even fears about their eternal destinies and their everyday world in which they suffered so they resorted to anything and everything under the sun to get out from their daily fears and burdens.

Bottom line, what I witnessed was both angering and heart-breaking all at the same time and I can't help but wonder if this is something similar to what Jesus saw as He looked out over the thousands of people in that desert of the Decapolis.

People who worshipped a ton of idols, or regularly burned incense to some piece of stone or animal god or who would be willing to marry a tree, or who went off on some immoral trail to appease the gods so they could get out from their daily fears and burdens. Yet despite looking at that crowd and those kinds of people, it says Jesus had compassion on those very people.

Now let me add another interesting nuance to this story. I want to point out something here about the source of the problem Jesus is addressing. The problem that arose (going hungry) was of *their own making*.

Think about it, here you have these folks who stay with Jesus three days *in the desert* and did not have enough food to care for themselves. It was so bad that Jesus feared that some faint from hunger on their way back home.

So what does Jesus do? Does He say: "*How dumb can you guys get? You come out this far and stay this long and you don't think of bringing enough food? Are you kidding Me? Well, you guys obviously weren't thinking. It's your own fault. You're going to have to figure your own way out of it.*" Which would have been something *I would have* said. But instead of responding like that, Jesus feels compassion and wants to change their circumstance however *undeserving* of it they were. Let's face it; at this point they are not only pagans, but foolish pagans!

So my question to us is this: Does *our* compassion extend *only as far as* people are not acting foolishly? Or perhaps another way to put it is this: Would you want people's compassion toward *you* to cease simply because you acted foolishly?

Physicians probably experience this a million times. People coming to them often about a mess the patient created by their poor eating habits,

smoking habits, lack of exercise, or lack of self-care, etc...

Yet every medical practitioner I know still seeks to help those people. They don't say to me: 'You know Steve, I'm really sick and tired of your lack of ability to do the right thing. Don't come back until you start living rightly.' Instead they continue to show compassion to me just as did Jesus to this crowd in the desert.

I emphasize this point because given how different these people were from monotheistic Judaism, and given the vast difference of their lifestyle from what God intended for humanity, it is amazing that Jesus, as looked at the vast differences, saw such folks as *more than* their paganism and their foolishness.

I bring this out because sometimes in our subconscious the matter of *differences* can become a big obstacle to our compassion. And if we are not diligent to approach each other with a Christ-like mindset the differences we see and have with others (and we will see and have them) can create not only Relational Distance, but even Disdain and Devaluation.

Have you ever seen or experienced how people's differences (be it religiously, politically, racially, etc.) can create relational distance and disdain, and then because of such things *your* value in their eyes lessens?

I remember when I was 23 years-old and I was on a bus

with a bunch of Christians going to a big Christian conference in the Midwest. I happened to sit next to the cutest girl on the bus. Of course I tried to kick up a conversation with her. She immediately seemed interested in having one too and spoke with this sweet southern accent. I was smitten.

After a few questions back and forth she asked me a very curious question: 'Are you blue blood'? Perplexed, I just smiled and said, 'No, my bloods pretty red.' With that her countenance changed and she turned toward the window of the bus and never spoke again the rest of the way to the conference. Only later did I learn that she was asking me if I was from a wealthy background because that is what 'Blueblood' meant in her culture.

Point is, it was amazing how that *one little difference* about me changed any interaction she wanted to have with me. My 'Relational Stock' or Value in her mind immediately plummeted all because I wasn't Blue Blood.

So again even as Christians, if we are not diligent to approach others with a Christ-like mindset the differences we see and have with others can create relational distance, disdain, and devaluation. And that kind of pathway can alter the expression of compassion to others to whom God has called us to love and sacrifice for.

Another thing about the danger of approaching differences *without* a Christ-like mindset is this:

Differences can also create Labels. Labels reduce people often to simplistic caricatures. They direct our attention to a narrow list of qualities in a multifaceted and complex human being.

When one of my kids was in public high school they spoke with their Christian teacher about me planting a new church. The teacher asked "Does he have women in leadership?" My child said, 'yes.' He then immediately said, "Oh, so he's a liberal." My daughter was perplexed because she never thought of me in such categories.

In fact, she didn't even know of such categories because we didn't raise her that way. But the thing I want to highlight here is this: Just like that, with just one answer to *one question* my whole life as a minister got summarized and categorized into a simplistic and inaccurate generalization. My total theology and ministry was now completely understood by this teacher based on *this one issue*.

Have you ever reduced someone to a label based on *one issue*? Seems like the culture is constantly doing this, isn't it?

Now I'm about to show you two pictures that some folks might think are controversial. I want to be clear I'm *not taking a stand* on any of the issues expressed in these photos. Does everyone hear what I'm saying? I'm showing these photos just because I want us to bring these big spiritual principles I'm talking about into our real world.

Check out these pictures (*one picture of a man holding up a sign supporting DACA, another picture of a group holding up a sign that supports building a wall along the border*). What is your gut response to these images?

These pictures, these issues has evoked all kinds of responses from folks today. Again I'm *not here* to say these guys are right or wrong. I put them up there to simply ask, how are *you* framing them as *people*, however right or wrong they may be in your mind?

I'm *not asking* how do you feel about the *issues* on the *placards*, but how do you feel about *the people* holding the placards? Have we reduced these people to simplistic labels, like that teacher did to me, simply because of one picture, one action, one stance, on one issue? Can we believe that there might be more to these people than their protests? Maybe they are good friends, good parents, good spouses, or even good Christians.

In all honesty, how many of us here have already questioned if some of these folks could possibly even be a Christian? There is a ton of things I don't know about any one of these people, so quick labels about who they are or what they are *all* about are ill-suited at best.

Part of my point here is this: there is not a person in this room who would want their life summarized by a single label or issue. How many of us would say 'Yes, I don't mind my life

being reduced to a single label?' And why don't we? Because we know deep in our hearts we are always more than any label put on us by others. And we also know that it feels a bit dehumanizing when we are viewed so simplistically and reductionistically.

Now let me add right here something that is important. Some of that labeling is not sin it's your brain. You see, your brain loves to take short cuts. It is always triaging all the info and stimuli that comes at it. If it didn't we would have, as scientists call it, 'Cognitive Overload.' And we wouldn't be able to make decisions in a short time if that happened.

So your brain wants to cut through a lot of details to quickly conclude things about people or situations. E.g. Are you safe? Are you Kind? Can you be Trusted? Your brain wants to quickly understand such things, but here's the thing about short cuts: Short cuts by the brain often lead to labels - quick, incomplete, and often inaccurate labels and as a result we can end up putting lines around *others* that may not be necessarily be of the Lord. Anyone ever struggle with that?

I bring up all this brain stuff because to live as Jesus intended, to see others as they *truly are*; in other words, as very complex, multi-faceted beings, passionately loved by Jesus, even the worst of them, will require a lot of spiritual discipline, This will not come easy.

Perhaps this is in part why the apostle Paul emphasizes having our minds renewed and transformed by God. Romans 12:2 says: *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*

Without a renewed mind we cannot see what *Jesus* sees, and if we cannot see what *He* sees, we won't feel what *He* feels, and so in the end we will not do what *He* did out there in the desert with some of the most lost and pagan people you would have ever met.

One great Christian writer and philosopher once said: *“The ultimate freedom we have as human beings is the power to select what we will allow or require our minds to dwell upon.”* (Dallas Willard)

What will you allow or require your mind to dwell upon when you see others like the people in those pictures, others who have *different* ideas than you? What will your mind dwell upon when people have different goals than you? *Different* political stands than you? *Different* religious beliefs than you? What will you dwell upon with people whom you might personally find foolish and ungodly?

Non-Christians may call those guys (in the photos) Narrow minded, Racists, Homophobic, etc. Or these guys in the other picture Extremists, Unpatriotic Socialist Commies,

and a host of other epithets. That's what non-Christians might say.

But my question is: what will we *Christians* say in the midst of all that? Will we speak with a different voice, or will we join the chorus of our world and of our culture?

Let me show you some verses that always challenge me a great deal as a Christian with issues like this. In Luke 6 Jesus lays out some of the toughest things a human can do in terms of love, mercy, and compassion. For the sake of time I'll give you the abbreviated version.

Luke 6:27-36; *But I (Jesus) tell you who hear Me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you... ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³² “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. ³³ And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that...*

³⁵ *But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

Whatever rationalized limitations *I* have about expressing compassion to others, I see all these verses and it really catches

me up short and sets me straight. *He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.* Wicked here means evil, morally corrupt; worthless. Isn't it possible, given the pagan worship in those days, given how Gentiles lived at that time, is it possible that such ungrateful and wicked people made up a good chunk of that crowd in the desert whom Jesus blessed so generously?

Do you know folks who are “Ungrateful and Wicked?” Can you join God in showing kindness *to them*? What is the cost to our culture if we Christians cannot?

I know that all sounds idealistic, but hear me out a second. In the news recently was the one-year anniversary of that horrible debacle in Charlottesville. As the anniversary came up I happened to watch a TED talk online about an African American man, who of all things, reaches out to members of the KKK, This is a man named Daryl Davis. He is a musician, author, conference speaker, and Christian.

As a 10-year-old Daryl Davis was pelted with cans and debris as he marched with his white Boy Scout troop in a local parade. Since then Daryl was driven to understand this question: ‘How can people hate me *when they don't even know me?*’ As the years went by he set out to know people who could hate him most, people of the KKK and for them to know him. Davis refused to be uninformed about these folks and he refused to label these guys as unredeemable.

He said he listened to men of the KKK with open ears and with an open mind. To be sure, he challenged lies with the truth, but in the form of questions rather than accusations and as a result, light slowly seeped in to the darkness.

Davis shared how at one time he had befriended a Klan member who was incarcerated. He would meet the daughters of this man at an airport and drive them to the prison so that they could visit their father.

Eventually the family noticed that none of the man's Klan colleagues were serving or loving them as much as Davis was and as one article put it, "Their ideology of hate collapsed in the face of undeserved compassion." Does that sound a little similar to our scriptures today? To make a long story short, because of his interaction with Klan members over 200 people have left the Klan because of a Black Christian man!

This is a picture of Davis with Scott Shepherd, a former Grand Dragon. If you don't know, a Grand Dragon is the highest-ranking Klansman in any given state and now even Shepherd goes around speaking about this issue.

Daryl Davis' story reminds me of the words of Christian writer and philosopher Dallas Willard when he said: "Our relations to others cannot be right unless we see those others *in their relation to God*. Even in its ruined condition a human being is regarded by God as

something immensely worth saving. *Sin never makes us worthless, only lost.*" Isn't that exactly how Daryl Davis saw and responded to even the worst folks of our society? Again, as Jesus demonstrates constantly, there is always more to a person than their sin, foolishness, crazy politics, or even their racism.

Now let me be very clear here about something. I'm *not* saying we should never discipline, or arrest, or convict people of a crime. I want to be really clear about that! We can still be compassionate *and* send people to jail. Those two things can go together.

Part of my point in telling Davis' story is to say that Jesus-like Compassion is *not impossible*. Luke 6 is not impossible. And I also tell this story because I want us to understand that Christian compassion is not some mushy saccharine feeling, that easily bubbles up inside like it does when see a wounded dog. Real Christian compassion takes incredible courage, fortitude, and perseverance to live out.

Moreover, I tell the Davis story with the story of Jesus feeding the Pagan Gentiles because we live in a fractured world right now and I'm hoping that perhaps through such stories we will see a Mindset, a Manner of Life that can change our world; that we can see how things can change when people are not labeled, disdained or demonized because of what they think, believe, or do. But they are listened to, served and cared for in Jesus name.

What is God saying to you today? What is *your* place in spreading God's compassion in the world - even unto 'the ungrateful and the wicked?' What is the cost to our culture if we in the church cannot spread it that far?

Furthermore, if you don't have Christ as your Lord and Savior today I hope you can see that when He sees you, *you* are *always more* than your list of sins or the labels people gave you in your lifetime. He has a different label for you: Beloved Child. And I hope you can see that however far off course your life has gone He is always ready to receive you, to embrace you, and to give you Hope. Would you consider giving your life to Him today?

As we close let me suggest you try three things this week: Meditate on the chorus of our closing song: 'For the One.' Meditate on Luke 6:27-36 and walk with a *daily expectation* that God will give you the opportunity to notice and respond to others with compassion.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com