

Council Presentation: Covenant and Compassion

Friday afternoon, February 19, 2010
106th Annual Council of the Diocese of West Texas
Corpus Christi

Hear again this passage from yesterday's Bible study:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love,
any sharing in the Spirit, and compassion and sympathy,
make my joy complete:

Be of the same mind, having the same love,
being in full accord and of one mind.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as
better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests
of others.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient unto death,
even death on a cross.

Philippians 2:1-8

In our two previous conversations, we've considered, first, how covenant **informs our understanding** of companions **and** how it **shapes our practice** of companionship. And second, we've looked at the notion of covenant and how that might help us better understand what it means to be "in communion" with other companions within the Anglican Communion—and the ways that being in communion might strengthen our witness to Christ as individuals, as congregations, as a diocesan family of churches, and as an international communion of churches within the "one holy catholic and apostolic Church."

That's a lot of weighty material to consider in a short period of time—and all of it presented under the banner of Galatians 6:2—"Bear one another's burdens." Our goal in pushing and stretching you in this way isn't simply to overwhelm you with information or baffle you with bullet points...but to make all that we consider during this Council portable—so that you can take it home, pray with it, work it like clay, set it within your own home and your own congregation, talk about it in Bible studies and Sunday School and youth group and Vestry meetings, bring it up at coffee hours and pot-lucks.

Because if these conversations don't get off the Council floor and back into your churches, we will have badly missed the mark. Just as the local church is the primary place where people encounter the Gospel and experience the life-changing power of the Spirit of Christ, so, too, are your congregations the primary places in which the mission and ministries of Christ—here organized around covenant and bearing each other's burdens—are fleshed out and made real.

We cannot begin and end our conversations on covenant and burden-bearing in theory and abstraction; we cannot leave it there. And so our hope is that, by God's grace and by the leading of the Spirit, all that we do here will get **personalized** for you, and **localized** in your churches.

This third conversation, "Covenant and Compassion," is intended to draw us further and deeper into the *practice* of living as God's people—people who are bound to God in the covenant he has made with us in Jesus Christ...the same covenant which calls

us and binds us to one another in the Church...and the same covenant that sends us to bear witness to Christ and his Kingdom in the world which he loves so much.

I'll do this in two parts. First will be an exploration of compassion as it meets us in the person of Jesus, and how God's compassionate love and intention--revealed throughout Scripture--finds its fulfillment in the incarnation, death and resurrection of his Son. Then, I'll collapse from exhaustion, and you all will have some time for table discussion. After that, I'll offer a second piece, which will, I hope, get us talking about what the practice of compassion might look like in our congregations. One way of thinking about all this is that the first part will examine our *identity* as people called into a covenant that is, at heart, compassionate. And the second part will examine the *compassionate mission* we are called to as people bound to God and to one another in Christ.

The great and surprising good news we have heard in Jesus Christ is that our God is a God of compassion. The great and surprising call we have received is to live together a life of compassion as the Church, Christ's Body. The holy work we've been given is to serve others with compassion.

Listen to this from Matthew's Gospel: "Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.' And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity." (9:35—10:1)

This phrase, "have compassion" or to be "moved with compassion" occurs twelve times in the New Testament, and always referring to Jesus or his heavenly Father.

"Moved with compassion" comes from a great Greek word I hope you'll remember: "*splagnitzomai*." "*Splagnitzomai*" means to feel in your guts. For people in that time, the bowels or guts were where the deepest, most intense emotions are located. They would refer to the guts as the source from which the most powerful feelings came, sort of like how we refer to our hearts now: My heartfelt thanks...I'm heartbroken over this...

Our English word comes from Latin, meaning “to suffer with,” and so “compassion” carries meaning far deeper and greater than mere sympathy or regret. The compassion evoked in Jesus is clearly more than a fleeting feeling. Rather, it extends to the core of his being.

Splagnitzomai as it describes what Jesus experiences is closely related to the Hebrew word *rachamim*, usually translated as “have mercy” or “show mercy” in the Old Testament. *Rachamim* derives from the Hebrew word for “womb.” The *rachamim* of God toward those who suffer and the *splagnitzomai* of Jesus toward those who suffer is the same thing. Jesus’ compassion is so central to the Kingdom of God that Jesus announces, inaugurates and embodies that it’s not too much of a stretch to say that Jesus’ compassion is a movement of God’s womb. It is this compassionate love that is at the heart of God’s covenant with Israel, and with us.

A second Hebrew word translated as “mercy” —*chesed*—comes into play here. Sometimes rendered as “loving-kindness,” it signifies the loving forbearance of God by which he faithfully keeps covenant, even when his people rebel and go their own way. We heard this in the psalms we prayed on Ash Wednesday: Psalm 51 reads, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness; in your great compassion blot out my offenses.” (v.1) And Psalm 103 reads, “The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness.”(v. 8) Because God is compassionate, we have confidence to repent of our sin and turn to him for life.

As we hear it reflected in the Prayer of Humble Access in Rite I Eucharist: “But thou art the same Lord whose property—whose nature—is always to have mercy.”

Jesus’ compassion expresses nothing less than the nature of God. It reveals something of the wonder and mystery of God’s love for humanity. Jesus looks. He sees. He is moved to compassion. His observation is not detached and clinical. He is moved into the suffering of others, bearing the burden with them. He is truly “Emmanuel,” which means, God-with-us.

God, looking upon the sin and pain and brokenness of his world, of his Church, of you and me, doesn’t think, “Oh, that’s a shame,” and look away. Instead he is moved and “unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given,” the perfect shepherd who becomes the perfect lamb, entering all the way into our lives, laying down his life to save ours. The

same compassion that moved God to hear the cry of the Hebrew slaves suffering under impossible burdens in Egypt, moves Jesus to see and to know and to bear the suffering of the world, “stretching out his arms on the hard wood of the Cross, that everyone might come within the reach of his saving embrace.” (BCP, p. 101)

To follow Jesus...to claim to be marked as his own forever...to call ourselves his Body...to be bound to him and one another...is to be led toward lives and churches and ministries that are, heart and soul, expressions of Jesus’ own compassion.

PART TWO

Jesus said: “Then the King will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’” (Matthew 25:34-40)

I leave the house early most mornings, don't see many neighbors, who are mostly older and retired. Drive out of my gated neighborhood, past a nice nursing home, two parochial schools and a good public elementary school, through a nice neighborhood, a few people out jogging or walking dogs. I've got news on the radio—Haiti, the economy and jobless rates, politics, car wrecks, crime, more politics, something humorous to lighten the load and keep listeners from driving into ditches in despair. I turn onto a larger road and it's more a mixed-bag: tattoo parlors, transmission shops, air-conditioned self-storage and cheap motels sharing the street with redeveloped office buildings and good restaurants. More people out on the streets: some rough-looking transients with camos and duffle bags, and at bus stops some workers head home from the night shift somewhere, while others are starting their day. It's not a bad part of town by anyone's definition, but I've seen enough crazy-looking people to tell my children to not stop and buy gas at night around here. I drive on, and I arrive at the Bishop Jones Center and the great office and staff you all provide for me and Bishop Lillibridge. It's like working in a sanctuary wrapped in a park. You should visit more often.

And thinking about our Lord being “moved to compassion” by the suffering and lostness he sees, I sometimes wonder why I am so often unmoved by what I see. And other times I wonder how in Christ’s Name I can possibly be compassionate toward all those I see and hear about on that six-mile daily drive to work. Somedays, I’m so preoccupied with my own stuff—what’s waiting for me at the office, what’s going on inside my head, that I hear but don’t hear the radio and I see but don’t see what’s outside my windshield. I mean, if I was open and responsive to all that, I’d never even get to the office. First, I’d stop at my neighbor’s whose wife is homebound. Then, I pull into the nursing home to offer some comfort and company. Then, at the elementary school to help someone learn to read and to pay attention to some little kid whose parents just don’t care. And I’d need to drop by the great big house on the corner whose owner is so wrapped up in protecting all his stuff that he’s lonely as hell. And so on, down the street. In fact, some days, if I was compassionate, I’d never leave the house, because some days that’s what Patti needs most from me and we’ve got a 16-year-old son who needs all the compassion I can muster.

You see what I mean? It’s one thing to rejoice in the compassionate love of God revealed in the life and work of Jesus, and it’s wonderful to hear that Jesus calls us to follow him into ministries of compassion. But it’s another thing to be confronted with a world of hurt and enter into it, identify with it, openly embrace it. Where do you start? Where do you stop?

And I think sometimes the Church is like me, driving down the road, windows up, radio blasting, preoccupied or fascinated or overwhelmed by our own stuff—our worries, our hurt, our poverty. We see, but don’t see, and we hear, but don’t hear. How can we minister to all the need in our community, for Christ’s sake, when our church community is in such need of healing?

Looking at the life of Jesus, we see that he was no perpetual-motion healing, feeding and caring machine. All that he did came from his compassionate heart, and the incarnation itself is an act of compassion—God entering fully into the human condition. But still, Jesus *practiced* compassion in a more disciplined and strategic way, always, it seems, with his eye on the new Kingdom he both announced and embodied. Recall that compassion is not primarily an emotion or a feeling. It is a deep movement of our being

and a corresponding movement of our *will* toward the suffering of others. If we are operating only on our *feelings*, then we are as likely to shy away from the hurt of another person as we are to draw nearer. My initial response to the earthquake in Haiti was horror. I wanted to watch everything I could find about it, to hear from people who knew people down there. Went online and made a donation. Made another donation in church that Sunday. But after awhile, my emotional engagement wore out—psychology calls it “compassion fatigue”—and when stories came on, I’d change the channel.

The first thing necessary for us to practice compassion is that we not look away. That is, we need to see who is before us. Helen Keller recalled a friend who came to visit her one day after a long walk in the woods. “What did you see on your walk?” she asked her friend. “Oh, nothing much,” the friend said. Helen Keller reflected, “I might have been incredulous had I not been accustomed to such responses, for long ago I became convinced that the seeing see little.” Jesus seeing the hungry and shepherdless crowds, had compassion on them...Jesus, turning and seeing the leper...seeing the sick...seeing the grieving mother, seeing the leader of the synagogue whose child was dying...had compassion, was moved in his guts to enter into their suffering.

And of course, our Baptismal Covenant calls and recalls us to look with care, to look more deeply...to “seek Christ” *and* “serve Christ “in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves”...and so fulfill the law of Christ.

A second necessary thing in practicing compassion is an openness to interruption. Jesus is often on his way somewhere—he’s got an important mission, places to go, people to meet—and yet he often would take detours, get sidetracked, get called to something else. He’s going to Jairus’ house to heal the man’s 12-year-old daughter who’s dying, when he gets interrupted by the woman suffering from a blood disease. He’s passing through Jericho and calls Zaccheus out of the tree and ends up having dinner at his house. He tells the parable of the Samaritan who goes out of his way to save a wounded, abandoned traveler. Always, Jesus transforms the interruption into the mission. The interruption to his plans becomes a way for the Kingdom to draw near.

How hard is it for us to see in those who interrupt our plans an opportunity for grace and healing? How hard is it for us as congregations, with all the things we worry

about and plan for, to be open to the possibility that something or someone unplanned may be the mission God has in mind for us?

Perhaps our emotions need to be stirred, our heartstrings tugged, to get us to see more clearly, but we also need strong and clear thinking, so that our efforts at compassion don't end up making *us* feel better, or less guilty, while leaving the hurting person in pretty much the same condition. What we need are prayerfully conceived ***strategies of compassion***. That is, within our congregations, as we look for ways to embody Christ's compassion, we should be seeking a compassion that brings us to our knees and makes our eyes sting with tears, ***but also*** is a compassion that is wise and steady and stubborn, willing to engage the principalities and powers which corrupt and destroy the children of God.

Paralysis comes when the scope of the need overwhelms us. Humility frees us to know that while we can't do everything, we can do *something*. And because we can do something, we are not free to do nothing. The covenant which gives us our identity and our freedom as the children of God, also gives us the responsibility to stand with those who suffer and to minister with compassion. We are bound for that kind of life, laying down our lives for the life of others.

Our capacity for compassion is, I think, a spiritual question. As such, it is grounded in our trust in Jesus. When he points us toward human suffering on a large or small scale, do we trust enough to follow him? When he tells us to deny ourselves and take up our cross daily—that is to share in the passion he bears for the world he loves—do we trust enough to try? When we look at our own sad divisions within the Church and are faced with such anger and pain and distrust that we can scarcely bear it, do we trust Jesus to give us grace and courage to enter into that brokenness, abide with others in their hurt, and bear one another's burdens? And just as importantly, will we let others enter compassionately into our own pain and bear *our* burdens?

To say that our capacity for compassion is a spiritual question does *not* mean it is merely a private one. Our call, our desire and ability, to live compassionately in the Church and our society can be cultivated, fed, strengthened and shaped by habits and practices of prayer, worship and study within our congregations. If it were not for regular liturgies that continually recall me to the truth about who I belong to AND that call me

outside myself I might be entirely unmoved by any suffering but my own, might be unbothered by the sight of self-storage units more comfortable and secure than the housing of many people within our communities.

Our capacity for compassion is renewed and deepened by participating in the company of fellow believers. If we are paying attention at all, we can see that being called into covenant with God in baptism brings us into relationships we would never choose on our own, and yet are relationships that make us more—and make us more real and human—than we could ever be on our own. As much as I appreciate my big office, I've found that it's more beautiful and life-giving to be out of it, out in the congregations, to witness and at times be part of the many and varied ministries *you* take on that extend and embody the compassionate love of Christ. Bishop Lillibridge and I both are deeply blessed and humbled to be part of a diocesan family—clergy and laity alike-- that so willingly enters into the suffering of others to offer Christ's healing, peace and love. We've seen so much given by so many: From drilling water wells to giving a cup of cold water... from building a Habitat house to paying for a motel room for a homeless family...from shipping Hymnals to troops in Iraq to teaching an adult to read...from giving groceries out of a closet in your church's kitchen to working for systemic change to defeat large-scale hunger...from comforting a homesick camper to sitting beside a dying friend...from gathering up school supplies for poor children to awarding thousands of dollars in college scholarships...when you're all nodding in understanding, I can stop...

When we truly see the need before us, when compassion moves us to stand with others, to see in the face of the other person NOT a stranger, a threat, or an inconvenience, but a brother or sister, then we've seen the face of Christ and it is our Lord himself whom we serve.

It's been a long day, and you all have been great in trusting us and one another with matters of the heart. Maybe there's even been some bearing of one another's burdens, which is better than simply talking about it. This has all certainly been more than can be digested in the time we have. Again, our hope is that all that we've considered in these three conversations will be highly portable, that you will gladly take

this back into your congregations. And now in your table groups, take some time to consider these questions. Then we'll call it a day.