

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

21st July, 2024 – Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

COMPASSIONATE LOVE

There is a TV show on at the moment called ‘I Was Actually There’; you can see it on the ABC, iView, and it’s even been converted into a podcast. As the name suggests, it is made up of current day interviews with people who were present at some more recent significant events in our history, and this is interspersed with some footage of those events occurring. The two we have watched so far are centred on the Port Arthur massacre in April 1996, and the Boxing Day Tsunami around Indonesia and Thailand in 2004. And as those being interviewed talk about these events that occurred nearly 30 years ago for the massacre at Port Arthur, and 20 years ago for the Boxing Day Tsunami, they do of course mention the horror of being caught up in these totally unexpected events, the death of loved ones, the physical injuries which in many cases they still carry, and relationships which sadly didn’t survive the trauma they had been through and still suffer from.

But one thing they also really highlighted, was the kindness, the care, the compassion, which complete strangers showed to one another in the immediate aftermath of these tragedies when outside help wasn’t there. It took a while for help to come in both of these cases. For Port Arthur, although it was less than 30 years ago, communication was a lot different to what it is today. Mobile phones were still relatively new, and of course we couldn’t film a video we could quickly upload, so it took a while for authorities to comprehend what had happened and then to mobilize assistance to what is a fairly isolated place. At the resort in Thailand which is the focus of the Tsunami story in this program, all the local help available was wiped out along with everything and everyone else, and this Tsunami event affected so many places across multiple countries that it took a while for both local and international help to mobilise and arrive. But, people said, what sticks out is that people who had no connection with one another except that they were in this place together at this time, in compassion they gave whatever help and assistance they could. Why? Because it was needed, and because they could.

Compassion is a word which has lots of different meanings and examples; maybe it has more layers than an onion, parfait, or even an ogre. I've shared before that I like the definition that compassion is love going out. From these stories we can get another example of compassion; it is care and kindness been shown where is no relationship with someone, no expectation of reward, no payback for something done for you previously. It is doing these things just because it is needed, and because we can.

The Greek word which is translated as 'compassion' in this Gospel reading is used 12 times in the New Testament; each time it is used to directly talk about how Jesus treats and helps people, or to show how others act in the same way Jesus does. At least three of those occasions occur in the parables Jesus told: a father who in compassion welcomes back a son who went away from home; a man who stopped to help an enemy lying bashed by the side of the road when a priest and temple worker had walked on by; and a king who forgave a servant a large debt which he could never hope to repay. Yes, the father obviously had a relationship with the son, and we would say we would expect a parent to react like that. But then again, the son had hurt him in a way that we could understand if the father completely disowned him. But with the other two there is no previous relationship. And for all three there is no paying back of a previous favour, and no way that the one who is helped can reward the helper in any way. They are all stories of compassion. Helping others because it is needed, and because we can.

Last week we looked at the theme of Gracious Love; how God's love, like the love in a family, is unconditional and unending. It is a love we are thankful to receive from God, and a love which He then calls us to share out with others. And that's where our theme of compassionate love, based on both the actions and teachings of Jesus, now comes in. Compassion is God's love going out. Compassion is God's love in action.

Compassion is ? What does it look like? What does it feel like? What does it sound like? From God to us compassion is God loving us totally and unconditionally despite knowing everything about us including our innermost thoughts. Compassion is God sending Jesus to die so we can be forgiven, even though He knew there would be times we would reject that and throw it back at Him. It is how God does care and provide for us, despite the fact we don't always make good decisions around those things. In this reading it talks about how Jesus shows compassion also in the way He teaches people about God's love,

and we also receive God's compassion in the Bible as we read and hear about His love for us. Compassionate love is what, thank God, He continually shows to us.

Compassion is ...? How do we finish that off for ourselves? One thing I read this week said that compassion is seeing, caring, and acting in mercy. Aid agencies like World Vision will sometimes say their challenge is to get people not to change channels, scroll down, or look away when they put an ad on asking for assistance. Compassion is, I think, not only not looking *away* from needs around us, but also looking *for* them. Actively seeking people who need help and assistance, which I have doubt is what people were doing after the Port Arthur massacre and Boxing Day Tsunami. How do we go with the people we live with, the people we work with, the people we worship with, the people we hang out with, in being open to seeing, to hearing, to understanding the needs they have?

And then, compassion is caring. It is easy to make judgements, to put conditions, on the way we help others. After the Boxing Day Tsunami in 2004 Australian Lutheran World Service ran an appeal to give assistance to the hundreds of thousands of people who had lost everything, and who also needed a lot of medical care. I promoted this in the school I was pastor in at the time, and a staff member there, who is a Christian, came to me concerned that was the money donated just going to help Christians, or Muslims also. Considering that well over 90% of those affected were Muslim, it's a simple answer. His way of looking at how compassion is shown is like that of Priest and the Levite who walked past the injured man on the road, or the prodigal son's older brother who thought compassion should be given out on the basis of what you have earned. But really, looking at it honestly, I know that one reason those kinds of reactions bug me is because I am guilty of them too. When I see or hear of people in need, I can also make judgements that they should have made better choices, they should just get out of that situation, they should get another job. It's easy to do, isn't it? Can you imagine the Good Samaritan getting off his donkey and saying to the injured man, 'why would you travel on a road like this by yourself? What a stupid thing to do!' (that would ruin the story) Compassionate love is not judging, but having a caring acceptance and understanding of people in need.

And compassion is acting, and that can certainly be the hard part, can't it? We can see, we can feel sorry, sympathise, however we want to say it, but it's in the acting that compassion comes out. Sometimes

we are genuinely unsure about what is the best way to do that, and that may be something to pray about. At other times, being honest, we don't want to put ourselves out or give up something in order to help. We live in God's gracious love, we receive God's compassionate love, and our call is now to be His eyes, ears, hands, and mouths in taking this love out. Think about situations you are in, or see or know about, and the means God has given you, and about what that means for you in showing compassionate love. Is it in providing a listening and supportive ear for someone? Is it in giving help in a practical way like helping them to get something done? Is it in donating money to agencies which offer assistance to people either in our own nation or overseas? Is it in helping them to know about God's love in the way we live, speak, and share this love with them? There are many ways we can do this, have a think about them. Compassionate love is actively living out the love we receive from God in the way we see, care and respond to people in our world.

In hearing those stories from people on that TV show, it reminded me that so often what we hear, and what we focus on, are the negative stories of how people treat one another, not the positive and caring stories which are always there also. And there are many reasons why people do act in these good and kind ways when they see a need. As those who know the Jesus who healed, taught, and reached out to people in the way He does in this Gospel account here, our call is to lovingly, indiscriminately, caringly, practically, show this love out to others also. We know, we experience, God's compassionate love in our lives every day. His call to us is to be a part of helping others to know and experience it also. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Although the media, and we ourselves, often tend to focus on the negative actions of people, can you think of examples you have either seen or experienced yourself, or heard from others, of people showing unconditional compassion?
- Think about your life; in what ways do you show compassion to others (when you stop to think about it there are probably more than you give yourself credit for)? What situations are around you, or do you know about, in which God may be calling you to show compassion?
- How do you go in seeing, caring, and acting in compassion? Is it easier in some situations and towards some people than in others? This is probably true for many of us. Ask God for His help to live and act out His compassion in your life.

Pray: thank God that we live in His compassionate love, and for all this means for us. Ask God to help us to be people who show and share this love with others.

*Pastor Andrew R. Koehler
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