

*A sermon delivered by The Rev. Barbara R. Cunningham, Minister for Pastoral Care, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, seventh Sunday after Pentecost , July 29, 2008, and dedicated to the glory of God!*

## **“Simple Compassion”**

### **Matthew, 10:40-42**

+++++

When I preach to groups of people that I know have a wonderful sense of welcoming and compassion, I wonder what I can say that will help us together look at this scripture again. But some of us are called on to preach, so I will do that today. Perhaps I can share some insights we have not thought of, perhaps the ideas will have been heard before, so let us begin with open hearts and a willingness to share with one another our own ideas.

Let us pray: God of love, with the intensity of violence and the pain of personal struggle, guide us to a deeper spiritual love. Your love carries us into the world, and as we begin anew, whisper a new perspective into our hearts. Out of chaos help us to bring peace; out of the pain, help us to bring relief; and out of joy, help us to laugh and cry together as we share life and explore compassion. Amen.

+++++

As you know, Jesus used parables and ways of speaking to the Jewish people that were examples of what was familiar to them. In the instance of this Matthew scripture, he was using a way of speaking that the Jews regularly used. The Jews felt that to receive a person’s envoy or messenger was the same as to receive the person himself. This was particularly so in regard to wise men and to those who taught God’s truth. The rabbis would say, “If this is a true man of God, to receive him is to receive the God who sent him.”

We have taken this scripture to heart, and we as women and men welcome those around us with open hearts and feel we are

spreading the love of the God who sent us. Today, I want to talk about spreading that love of God through simple acts of welcoming and caring.

A short while ago, some of our youth, their lay leaders and Rev. Lori and Mark, on mission trip, learned some new things about sharing with those who have less than we do, which they will share with us at some pint. We have to learn what really helps - Is it giving money on the spot, or is it learning how to listen and hear the story, giving a cup of coffee, or water as we listen, and seeing the whole picture as we guide a person to the right kind of help?

In this congregation, 2007 was a year with little hope. I don't have to describe to you what that meant, but when I came to be with you last January, I began to feel the pain around me. Together we are beginning to heal, and the challenge before me is to hold you in God's love and truth.

When I lived in southern California, my sister and I took a trip to the desert in the early spring. Usually it is either too cold or too hot to enjoy the desert, but she insisted that it would be wonderful. So trusting and loving her, I went with her. We had a camper on a pickup that we slept in, and the first day in the desert, I almost cried. It was dry and desolate looking. But my trust in Jeanne, my sister, (probably a messenger from God) led me to accept my plight. That first night, there was a rain storm, and I thought of how muddy and desolate the landscape would be. But to my surprise, I looked out of the window and thought our camper had moved without our knowledge. All around us the unexpected rainstorm had soaked the earth with life-giving water. The desert was in bloom. I had never seen anything so beautiful and hour by hour more green and flowers appeared.

When we live without hope, our compassion fades, and we become a bit apathetic. Every so often we get shaken up by some tragedy

like 9/11, flooding, tornados, fires and earthquakes. We read the scripture today, and it tells us to have compassion, and we do, but how can we act it out. Reaching out to help is not always what we think it will be. There was a journalist, Maria, who wanted to go to the African desert to work on international development. She imagined living in a small hut of her own, with a palm tree by its side. She thought not of luxury, but pictured something like in the movie *Out Of Africa*. She pictured the desert to be fertile and filled with hope.

When she arrived, she realized that no one had arranged for her little hut with the palm tree. She was to live in a place with many people. The room she was given was like in an office with dividers, where the walls were only half-walls. There was to be lots of exposure, not one private place. What Maria learned was that her idea of close community and neighbor quickly came down to earth and took concrete form. There was no place to be alone, never a place to hide when you first get up and don't want anyone to see you until you look okay. The rough edges of day-to-day living didn't get smoothed out in the half-wall house, they became rougher.

What Maria had planned for her life did not turn into what she believed it would be. She had to let go of her idea of what she thought it should be and open herself to learning. What she had to learn was painful, yet made her life more honest and whole. Because the community could see her all the time, she learned that she was neither as nice nor as neighborly as she had always believed she was. She learned it was much easier to be a hypocrite when life is divided into public and private. In this setting, there was little room for pretense, for false appearance, for deception. She found that in the desert, the physical nearness of people imposed restrictions - she couldn't be charming in public and nasty in private. Yet, she made friends and learned to be a part of the half-wall community - openly and with hope.

Can we peer over our walls of privacy and concern, personal

gratification, and be who we really are to connect with another? I believe we yearn to connect with another, yet we resist showing who we really are.

Maria was able to let go of her idea of the perfect way to help others and to see beyond the half-wall she lived in. She was able to know God is present not only in her, but in the others in the room and that she could truly have faith and be real.

Our challenge is not just to be comfortable in our own skin, but when we are called upon to help, look at what is best for the other person as well. When a homeless, street person comes to us and asks for money, there are many feelings that arise in us. Some of those feelings are guilt about having so much, or a feeling of not wanting to look selfish, or truly wanting to help but not know whether the dollar we give will really help or hinder.

Whether our challenge is large or small, are we willing to let go of what we “have to have” in order to give what is best for the situation.

I once lived near Los Angeles, (in Pasadena) when the fires in East L.A. burned. There was a riot over racial issues that you probably heard about - the beating of Rodney King by the police and then the beating of the truck driver by some African-American men. When the fires waned, we in the conference were called upon to rally the people of our faith to find ways to help the elderly on East L.A. by getting them prescriptions that they couldn't get out to get, or doing clean-up in the area. You can imagine how frightened anyone would be to go into an area that had rioted, but I was determined to let go of my fear and venture out. It was one of the best experiences of my life. I went to one of our churches in the area, got names of people I could help, was accompanied by many of the people of that congregation, and we met people who were stranded and needed help. While I was looked at with suspicion, after awhile I learned that it didn't matter. A smile and a cup of water that we carried with

us and a strong arm to help clean was all I needed.

People began to laugh together at some of the situations they were in. When it came to curfew time, we went to one of the churches and stayed the night together. We told stories of our own lives, and sought to discover what it must feel like to live in the burned out areas with fear. My life was so impacted by that experience. I was glad I didn't follow my first instinct of fear and questioning - what help would I be?

There are so many disasters in the world right now - the floods in the Midwest, the fires in the West, the war in the desert of the Mideast countries and much more. We have been shaken by many things around us. Yet, when we are welcoming and the carrier of God's love to the world, it changes us. Life is precious and it happens when we least expect it. Out of tragedy can come a new understanding of life. There are dark times and there are times of light. We think of the immense journey that life has taken, evolving us to where we are today. Through all of life - it is goodness and it is darkness - the creative power we call God has sought to create the vehicle through which to express compassion. We are that vehicle. And we are not alone, because I believe all human beings can be the expression of God's love.

We cannot, as the expression of God's love, deny our responsibility to the world. In the midst of the chaos, we are called to look at the whole picture, to believe in new beginnings, and feel the energy and power we are given by God to love the world. God is everywhere if we but open ourselves to experience the powerful presence, and let go of our need to control what happens.

Ann Weems wrote a piece that hit me hard and I'll share that with you. Sometimes that cup of cold water turns out to be a cup of hot coffee, and what we're asked to do is to pour it, and to listen. Sometimes we Christians, in our enthusiasm, think we were asked to save the world, when what we were asked to do is to go into it and

tell God's story to people in need of some good news.  
Anxious activists forget that just listening is an act of faithfulness.  
Guilty givers forget that just listening is an act of stewardship. Since we church people have a tendency to be driven, anxious and guilt-ridden, perhaps we should read the directions again, and pour a cup of hot coffee and listen in God's name. Amen