

“Overcoming Compassion Deficit Disorder” a sermon based on Luke 7: 7-11 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 5 June 2016 by Kerry Enright

Just to be clear, it's a term I made up for this sermon – Compassion Deficit Disorder...

Tracey McIntosh was amid a group of young women in prison. She mentioned she had never been hit by a man. The women did not believe her. How could this be? How could any woman live a life without suffering violence?

Tracey is a sociologist examining violence in our society. The team with which she is working all have convictions for violent crimes. She is working with individuals; and she is looking at the social system, at policy. The women in prison want to make a difference for those who come after them. They explore what caused social harm to them as children and young people. They look at what was in abundance in their lives and what was scarce.

They think about the resources that helped them find value in their lives. Tracey does the same for men who perpetrate violence. From the time Stan Coster was eight years old, the state was his parent. He spent much of his life in prison until he discovered the value of education - now he has two PhDs and he is part of the team trying to reduce violence.

How do people overcome Compassion Deficit Disorder?

In the Dunedin Longitudinal Study between a third and a quarter of participants had experienced violence over a year. Those in a violent relationship tended to have experienced family adversity, dropping out of school and violent youth crime; complicated by long-term unemployment, mental illness or drug abuse.

One of our biggest challenges as a nation is to overcome in our own society Compassion Deficit Disorder, the disorder by which people do not feel deeply for another, by which people harm each other.

It is not limited to one sector of society.

What drives tax havens and tax evasion but the absence of compassion for people who do not have the resources to make money?

What drives people to accumulate large sums of money but the absence of compassion for people who are poor?

What enables equality and justice more than a deep sense of compassion.

The opposite of compassion is indifference.

It's a theme of Pope Francis.

“As creatures endowed with inalienable dignity, we are related to all our brothers and sisters, for whom we are responsible and with whom we act in solidarity ... indifference is not something new; every period of history has known people who close their hearts to the needs of others, who close their eyes to what is happening around them, who turn aside to avoid encountering other people's problems. But in our day, indifference has ceased to be a purely personal matter and has taken on broader dimensions, producing a certain “globalization of indifference”.

He talks about how we can be vaguely aware of tragedies afflicting humanity, but we can have no sense of involvement or compassion - especially if it does not touch us directly.

“Indifference can even lead to justifying deplorable economic policies which breed injustice, division and violence for the sake of ensuring the wellbeing of individuals or nations.”

“Mercy is the heart of God ... Jesus tells us that love for others – foreigners, the sick, prisoners, the homeless, even our enemies – is the yardstick by which God will judge our actions. Our eternal destiny depends on this.”

Our eternal destiny and our national destiny.

Some years ago one Saturday I had two weddings and a funeral. It was carefully managed so that one did not interfere with the other. Each had a different tone.

Imagine if the wedding had gone late and the people for the funeral had to wait outside. Then imagine the people celebrating the wedding – happy, animated, talkative, buoyant - coming out of the church being met with people gathering for the funeral – the grieving family, the casket, the funeral director ... all lined up, waiting for their turn.

One group meeting another.

That's what happened in Nain. The disciples and a large crowd were with Jesus. They had witnessed the healing of the slave's son. They had experienced the generosity of the Roman Centurion. The gospel last week. They had journeyed a day and here they are, full of joy, overcome with gratitude, buoyant with hope. And as they approach the gate, they are confronted with a funeral procession – a body, a grieving mother, a keening crowd. A man who had died was being carried out.

The woman was in particular need. In an age without social security, a woman relied on male protection. She was a widow – no husband to provide for her. And now her only son had died – no man to provide for her. She was doubly down. She is the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the excluded.

When Jesus saw her, he had compassion.

Compassion here is the Greek word *splanchnizomai* – Jesus felt the woman’s pain in his gut, in his stomach. It’s a bowel word.

Our nation, our world, our family, our church relies on that experience, feeling with others, feeling with others in our stomachs, com-passion.

Compassionate action is not always natural. Dave Andrews suggests compassionate action requires us to break through barriers:

- the barrier of futility, of hopelessness, imagining it will make no difference, it is all too much – in front of us we see a brick wall, with no way through. How overwhelming is the challenge, how small is the resource, how fragile is our spirit, how weak is the team, how strong is the opposition, how big is the challenge. Yet, as Lois Brandeis – Most of the things worth doing in the world had been declared impossible before they were done. Andrews says we underestimate our circle of influence, the number of people we could influence, and what difference they could make acting compassionately.
- the barrier of selfishness, self-centredness, preoccupation with ourselves – our culture saying ... you need to look after number one because no one else will. Our capitalist culture nourishes acquisitiveness. It can be overcome by finding in the middle of our lives, a space, a room, into which we can bring others, in prayer, in thoughtfulness, in naming them. If we fill the centre of our lives with ourselves, there is no room for others and thereby God. Can there be in the middle of our lives, in our hearts, a home for others, as we think of them, name them, pray for them. Dave Andrews says that the best way to deal with selfishness is not by trying to conquer myself but by being conscious of others in the midst of daily life. Making space at the centre – having a blank piece of paper at the centre of our lives on which we can write the names of people who come to our attention.
- the barrier of fear – fear of the unknown, fear of others, fear of how we might react, fear of how they might react, fear of risking our space. But all of life is risk. To laugh is to risk appearing a fool. To weep is to risk appearing sentimental. To reach out is to risk involvement. To live is to risk dying. To try is to risk failure. The one who risks nothing may avoid suffering and sorrow, but cannot learn or feel or change or grow or love. The one who risks nothing cannot be fully human.

- the barrier of spitefulness – many live with a policy of tit for tat, a good turn for a good turn, you scratch my back, I scratch yours, one good act deserves another. A philosophy that traps people. A church decided to stop its community programme because no one came to church. Contrary to the gospel of love, which is never about what comes back. Miroslav Volf is a Croatian Christian whose family was brutally driven from the former Yugoslavia. In his wonderful book *Exclusion and Embrace* he says ... “I open my arms to create space in myself for the other. The open arms are a sign of discontent at being myself only and of a desire to include the other. They are an invitation to the other to come in and feel at home with me, to belong to me.”

The call on us as followers of Jesus is to embody and to proclaim the value of compassion in every dimension of our being, in every corner of our nation, in every part of the world. To embody it – overcoming hopelessness, and self-centredness and fear and retaliation. And to proclaim it as a community of Jesus.

Compassion, *splanchnizomai*, feeling with others in our gut, our stomach, our very body.

Learning compassion means I need to live with someone whose very being is compassion, to learn from him, to engage with him, to abide with him, even Jesus Christ, and to learn with others how to make space in the centre of our lives.

I learn compassion in conversation with him and his followers.

~~~~~

## **KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN**

### ***growing in courage to live the Jesus way***



**Knox Church**  
449 George Street  
Dunedin  
New Zealand  
Ph. (03) 477 0229  
[www.knoxchurch.net](http://www.knoxchurch.net)

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, [minister@knoxchurch.net](mailto:minister@knoxchurch.net)