“In the Well With Humanity”

Matthew 5:1-20

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I’ve heard it said that there is one common denominator among all the world’s religions. It isn’t worship of a higher power. It isn’t anything to do with rituals. The common factor between the diverse religions of the world is quite basic, actually. Each one points toward compassion. Compassion is the one factor that ties all religions together. In every religion around the globe, there is some version of the Golden Rule, which is to treat others how you want to be treated. Every single religion has this as part of their tradition.

This compassionate Golden Rule is seen in the Law of the Old Testament and in Jesus’ teaching. We are told that the greatest commandment is to love our God with everything we have. And the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbors as ourselves. All of the law is bound up in these two commands. None of the others are valid, if we aren’t faithful to these two commands. In that second rule, God calls us to show compassion to our neighbors, by loving them and serving them.

Compassion is often one of those concepts that gets oversimplified. We typically boil it down to being nice to other people. Sometimes this turns into sympathy or pity, even. These are rather shallow understandings of a very complex word. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary gets closer to a good definition when it states that compassion is “sympathetic consciousness of others’ distress together with a desire to alleviate it.” This scholarly definition reveals that compassion is more than just being nice to other people. It means being aware of a person’s distress and wanting to help them find healing. That’s a pretty solid definition.

But what if we take it a step further and look at the etymology of the word? Break it down into pieces and discover its original meaning? We’d have to go back to the Latin root. I know, it’s early for a linguistics lesson, but bear with me!

Our modern day word “compassion” comes from the Latin word “compati” which means “to suffer with”. So the original intent of the word goes beyond being nice or pitying others. It literally means to suffer with those who suffer. To have compassion means to recognize the suffering of others, and take on their pain right alongside them. Compassion suddenly feels like a burden. Not so simple.

A good image to use when thinking about compassion, is getting into a well with someone. Imagine a person is sitting at the bottom of a well, several feet below the earth’s surface. They are stuck and they are miserable. They don’t know how or are unable to get out of the well on their own. Compassion means crawling into the well with that person. Going in to the depths of their pain and sitting right beside them. Listening to their laments. Feeling their hurts. Knowing their suffering. This is true compassion.

This is what Jesus Christ is talking about in his Sermon on the Mount.

Our text for this morning points out how Christ has compassion for the world. It begins with the beatitudes. Those “blessed are the” such and such statements. It is important to recognize that these statements, the blessed are the poor and so on, are not commandments. They are not a list of situation that Christ is telling his followers to pursue. He isn’t saying become poor so that you may be blessed. He is saying, those of you who are already poor are blessed. Another way to think about blessed is “greatly honored”. The Presbyterian Woman may recall that from a Horizon’s Bible Study a few years ago. A better translation of the phrase is “greatly honored are the poor and those in mourning and the persecuted.”

Jesus reveals that we are to honor all of the people who are suffering in this world. He calls us to have compassion for them. He does this by embodying their pain. He himself was poor and persecuted. He hungered and thirsted for righteousness, hoping for a better world. He is not a savior who is set apart from the common people. He is right there with them. Experiencing their suffering, standing in solidarity with those who are trampled on by the world. Embodying compassion in a radical way. When he enters this world, he crawls down into the well to sit with those who are suffering and in pain. He doesn’t shy away from it, rather he gravitates toward that suffering and takes it on himself.

By doing this, he tells us, he is fulfilling the law that has been set. All of those commandments that are wrapped up in loving God and loving our neighbors. Christ lives that out each day that he walks the earth. And in this Sermon on the Mount, he calls each of the hearers to do likewise. To be compassionate toward one another. To take on their suffering and feel their pain. To stand in solidarity with those who are persecuted. In this way Christ calls us to a radical notion of discipleship. More than just about believing in him and following him. It’s about doing as he does. Loving as he does. Embodying compassion as he does. Getting into the well with humanity, just as he does.

Jesus says to his disciples and followers: “You are the salt of the earth, light to the world.” This means you need to be seasoning the world with empathy and standing as beacons of compassion. Don’t just let those who are poor and mourning and broken sit in that well by themselves. Get down in there with them. Show them love and be compassion for them.

Christ offers us the example of how to do this. He comes to be with us. In the well with humanity. In solidarity, experiencing all of the pains listed in the beatitudes. He comes to fulfill the law, which he later states is wrapped up in two commandments: to love God and love people.

And he challenges us to do likewise. Crawl into the well with those who suffer and are oppressed. Be with them and ease their burden.

Going through hard times is much easier when you have a community of support with you.

A recent study points out the truth of this. Scientists have spent a great amount of time studying addiction. It is still unclear what exactly causes addiction. In some cases, there is a chemical hook that keeps people on their substance. Like nicotine or cocaine. But not all addictions have a chemical attachment. Gambling, pornography and food addictions are examples of this. Scientists have been trying to explain why it is that people can’t just get over these addictions

A recent study aimed to look at the effect of community on addiction. They took lab rats and put them in cages. For the first test, they put one rat in each cage, isolated from each other. They weren’t allowed to socialize with other rats. They weren’t given any toys or any comfort items. All they had was a food dish and two bottles. One was just water and the other was filled with water laced with cocaine. These isolated rats always preferred the water laced with drugs. They would drink it in lethal quantities, preferring it over the healthy, pure water. The effects of the drug acted as an escape for the rats who were living in isolation and boredom.

In the next test, they put several rats in a larger cage. In this experiment, they allowed the rats to socialize with each and play with each other. They were given many toys and comfortable bedding. This cage was rather luxurious compared to the other one. Again, they put two bottles in the cages. One with plain water and one with the cocaine water. For the rats who had the company of each other, they rarely drank the drug laced water. None of them drank it in lethal quantities, and all of them preferred the plain, healthy water. They didn’t need the drugs, because they had the comfort of each other and a good environment.

This study translates to the human experience. There are many instances of people using drugs while in an isolated, stressful environment. But as soon as they are brought out of that isolation, they no longer feel the need to rely on drugs for comfort.

So it seems that the opposite of addiction is not sobriety. It is connection. We are created to need each other and we rely on connection for survival. A compassionate community is the way to heal the brokenness running rampant in our world. Jesus calls us to seek out those who are isolated and suffering. To be with them. Offer them hope and comfort through our compassionate care.

I’m willing to bet that each of us can think of one person, or a group of people who need our compassion. The thing about this world is that no matter how bad life gets, there is always someone who has it worse than you. How might we respond to Jesus’ sermon, by showing compassion to those in need of it? How might we crawl into the well with one of our neighbors and sit with them in their pain?

Christ offers the model, by getting in the well with humanity. Taking on our suffering alongside us, to lighten our burden. And in turn, he calls us to connect with one another. To show compassion for those who are suffering. To honor those who are poor and persecuted. To crawl down into that well with each other, with the sure and certain hope that someday Christ will lift us out of that well, together.

See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/johann-hari/the-real-cause-of-addicti\_b\_6506936.html