

Compassion in Seeing and Welcoming

I am so glad you are here today. Today marks the beginning of Five weeks in which we will be exploring Compassion in the Scripture. I imagine we could all stand a bit more compassion in our lives right now -- as there is much suffering and loss happening. Loss of what was normal, loss of a sense of certainty, loss of physical contact with family and friends, loss of celebrations — even gathering publicly to watch fireworks for 4th of July. The good news is 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 tell us there is one who cares about what we are feeling and experiencing. He is the God and Father of Compassion. The God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. Isn't it a comfort to know we are not alone in what we are going through inspire of what it might feel like. God is with us and cares for you and me.

When we listen to stories we can learn so much from the feelings of the people. This is one way we learn about the Father's compassion for his son in our gospel story. WE see, listen and recognize what people are feeling, and this helps us to feel their joy and their hurt with them. Sometimes it requires a bit of imagination on our part because the story might not tell us directly what people are feeling. For example, we might focus on the younger brother and father, but the older brother has something to show us, too. Compassion helps us to see how every human being is important and loved by God.

We have heard a story about a family party where everyone was celebrating around a meal. But one family member was not too happy about this party!

Understanding compassion starts with looking at emotions

In our gospel today we hear a story full of emotions. Did you know some expressions are contagious — like when one person yawns. It is common for the people around them to yawn too! It is the same with laughing.. smiling... frowning... Crying... Even Anger and fear can be contagious as we are seeing in our world today.

The interesting thing is we can offer compassion to others as we have been offered compassion by God. When you see someone yawn or laugh or cry, something in your brain responds because you know what it is like to feel laughter or sadness or sleepiness. **This is called empathy.** And when we know what it is like to feel something, we can become more compassionate towards one another.

For example, if you see me stub my toe, you feel compassion for me because you know it hurts. Your foot cannot feel it in that moment, but your empathy kicks in and your brain reminds you what that suffering feels like. If your compassion is strong, you might offer to help me to sit down.

That is **what compassion is**: you see my hurt, you feel my hurt with me (empathy) and you are move to help ease my hurt by acknowledging it

But in order to show empathy, **we need to see each other! Really Seeing each other is the beginning of compassion.** I would add it involves suspending judgements or rationalizations. Just seeing each other as human beings.

Jesus often gathered with his disciples and others around a table. Something happens When we gather around a table. When We look into each other's eyes or hear each other's voices we begin to be able to understand how we are all feeling. That is why it is so important that we welcome others to our table - whether it be our kitchen table, the Lord's table of communion or our lunch table at school or even a digital table online. When we welcome people different than us, we are able to show more empathy.

Our opening song today focused on how God invites everyone to the table of blessing. Everyone is included. I invite you to think of all the people that you would like to include at God's table. The beauty is God welcomes all to his table and we all come to His table as family.

To see and welcome is how we accept one another. When we gather together at the table, we accept each other in the same way God accepts us. It takes intention and practice recognizing and sharing in the feelings of others as well as connecting with our own bodies and emotions. Through the parable of the father and the two brothers in Luke 15: 11-32, we witness how compassion empowers us to release any anger and judgement we may hold toward others, ourselves, and the world for not being what we wanted or needed. We learn how compassion inspires seeing, forgiveness, and welcoming. I invite you to listen in for the emotions in this parable.

Jesus told this parable: There was once a man who had two sons. The younger brother **greedily** demanded his inheritance, turned his back on his family, and left them for a far away country. He wasted all the money he took from his family.

Soon he became needy and **hungry**. Even though he felt **ashamed**, he decided to return home, hoping his father might welcome him back.

When his father say him, he was filled with **compassion**. He ran out to his son and threw his arms around him. He was so **happy** he was alive! The father got a big dinner together with the best food and drink to give thanks for his son safe return.

Meanwhile, the older brother came in from the fields, **tired** from working hard all day. When he heard the music and dancing, he became very **angry** and refused to go in.

His father went to the older brother to persuade him to come, but he said: “I’ve listened to you and worked hard for you all these years and you’ve never given me a party. My brother comes home after wasting all his money and you throw him a huge party!”

His father said to him: “Son, I love you. You know what is mine is yours. But people matter more than possessions. WE thought we lost your brother from our family, but he’s home. **Come to the table, and celebrate with us!**”

I wonder what did the father see in His son's returned? What do you imagine the youngest son was feeling upon return that the Father felt too?
Did you see what the father saw? Did it move you to compassion? Have you ever lost someone only to get them back?

How about the older brother what did he see? What emotions were coloring his sight?

What feelings did you feel when you heard the story? Sadness, shame for the younger son, anger, shock, disappointment, surprise?

In this story who shows compassion? Who receives compassion?

I wonder if the older brother ever came to the party?
I wonder What would he have had to let go of? Maybe his anger / resentment / jealousy — Maybe his focus on things over people?

Who might he have sat with at the party if he was able to let go of these emotions and forgive his brother and father?
Do you think he sat at the table with his dad and brother? If not, when might they have had a meal together again?

Who sits with you at your dinner table? What do you talk about?

How do you welcome each other when someone’s had a hard day or doesn’t want to sit at the table?

Compassion is seeing and welcoming. I invite you to see with eyes of compassion those you encounter this week. You might even consider doing a little project with your family or friends together or on your own. Consider creating a simple centerpiece for your table to remind you this is the place where you see and are seen and hear stories. This centerpiece could be done together or as an individual. Keep it there for the next 5 weeks to remind you to slow down and really see and listen to one another’s stories and emotions and imagine how they feel.

Compassion would have us imagine being in the other person's shoes. If you live alone, employing a bit of active imagination — consider having a chair for Jesus to join you and consider telling him about your day over a meal. You might be surprised at what you hear and feel. Or call a friend that is on their own and ask if you can talk on the phone while you share a meal.

This compassion in action is meant to remind us how we can be with each other so that in everything we make, do or say, we feel Emmanuel, or God-with-us. These small, simple, tangible acts express the deep, wide compassion of God. You are invited to make a centerpiece or table decoration for your next meal together that can stay as a reminder of how God draws everyone together at the table of blessing.

Compassion helps us to see how every human being is important and loved by God.

Before we move onto the rest of our service, let's pray this prayer about compassion together. You might even Place one hand on your head and one hand on your heart. We are doing this because compassion happens in our brains, but we often feel it in our hearts.

Let's pray: Welcoming One, your warm, wide arms are always open, drawing us into your heart full of love. Thank you for forgiving us in your mercy. Make **our arms your own, helping us see and welcome with compassion all those we meet.**