

Michah 6
March 6, 2016
Cross of Compassion

Pretend with me a moment that you wake up in the middle of the night and realize that your house is on fire, you have only two-three minutes to get out safely and you can only carry three things, what do you take from your house? Now the first two are obvious, children and pets, but the third one is interesting. It could be a photo album of your wedding day, a picture off the wall given to you by a dear friend, a paperweight made by hand from a loved one who has passed away. Things that other people might wonder or question, why did you save that? But to you, they are worth saving along with children and pets because they symbolize and signify a relationship.

And relationships are so important. So important that they form the foundation of scripture and our faith. We worship a God who is interested in having a relationship with us, who cares how we act, and how we treat one another. So, today we look at this relationship as we look at the cross. Because the cross is all about our relationships and how we treat one another. In this season of Lent, we have looked at the cross of grace – God’s tremendous gift of new life that transforms us from the inside out. We looked at the cross of comfort where Jesus takes our burdens and hurts – healing our brokenness. And today we look at the cross of compassion. Now, nothing about the cross or Jesus crucifixion was compassionate as he was beaten, bloodied, and nailed to the cross. And yet, with compassion he looked down to proclaim – “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”.

For on that cross by the power of the Spirit and because of how precious and loved we are by God – an instrument of violence used for crucifixion and torture is transformed. In a

sense, the trash of violence and hate is transformed to a treasure of compassion and hope. So, let me tell you about, Bilikiss Adebisi-Abiola, from Lagos, Nigeria. Bilikiss got her Masters of Business Administration degree from Massachusetts Institute of Technology. An MBA from MIT would open up a world of possibilities for Bilikiss. Yet, this is not who this young woman is. She had seen people in the United States sort their trash into recycling bins, and learned how this simple act helps preserve the environment.

Then, this young woman remembered her home where trash is a huge problem. She remembered her relationships and how in Lagos, about 60 percent of the trash made by the 21 million residents is never collected. It sits in piles and sometimes in the street. More than an odious nuisance, uncollected trash is a dangerous health hazard. Garbage piles are breeding grounds for flies and rodents that spread disease that kills thousands, mainly children every year from preventable diseases.

So, she began to formulate a plan she could put in action when she arrived in Lagos. She thought about ways to educate people about the benefits of recycling and how her company -- she would call it Wecyclers -- would help. Upon arrival, things didn't go as planned. When she shared her message of how recycling would help the environment, many of the people of Lagos were not listening. Then she had another revelation.

Lagos generates approximately 735,000 tons of plastic each year, worth about \$300 million to waste brokers who resell it to recyclers and others. "That's money lying on the street," Bilikiss says.

Not only would recycling help the city with their trash problem, and cut down on the spread of disease, it would generate cash -- money that could help people improve their lives in other ways.

Bilikiss started offering incentives, in essence paying people for their recyclables. Today Wecyclers is cleaning up! They visit some 6,000 homes each week exchanging cash and household goods for recyclables, collecting 40 tons each month. The lost money once left lying in the street is being reclaimed. What was once trash is now seen as a treasure.

And so, we come to our to our Gospel lesson about a man traveling to Jericho [SHOW Picture] who was beaten up and left for dead - lying in the ditch half dead – treated like a piece of garbage thrown away. And we hear of those who pass by - religious leaders you would think would stop but they don't. Until one man was “moved with pity” – moved with compassion – one man who truly “saw” in this man treated like garbage a true treasure - and at great expense and with tremendous compassion he took care of him. He didn't know this man but that didn't matter for he was a fellow human being in trouble – even though the injured man was a Jew and the man who helped was a Samaritan – and they were traditional enemies – this didn't matter.

For the point of this parable is all about relationships – This whole parable came about in a conversation Jesus had with a lawyer as he explained this famous scripture “You shall love the Lord your God with all our heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” To which this man asked the question - “Who is my neighbor.” In other words, are there limits to my compassion? Who don't I have to love? Who don't I have to care about?

And the answer Jesus gives so eloquently is that we are to have compassion on everyone – even those we may not like. It's like when you lose someone close to you and the person you couldn't stand at the office is the one who drops off lasagna and offers to be there for you. And this changes things. Could the Jewish man keep cracking jokes about Samaritans after he stopped, gave his money, and checked on him to make sure he was okay. Reaching out and loving in this way changes things.

Because through the cross – Jesus is our great recycler – our great redeemer who sees something very different. Each one of us has been made in God's image, and God is not about to cast us aside, relegating us to a landfill.

As Bilikiss saw the abandoned aluminum and plastics as "money lying on the street," so God sees the value in us even when we may not. We have not been abandoned. We have not been tossed aside. God loves us and knows our worth. When we turn toward God, God sprints toward us, embraces us and welcomes us home.

And so our love expands and grows. For the cross of compassion calls us to resist when others pass by on the side of the road pointing out the sins of others but do nothing to be in relationship with them. When others use the virtual roadsides of Facebook and other social media sites to blame outsiders and other groups for problems in our country and our world.

But on the cross – Jesus who was most often on fringes, who was with those who were cast out, discarded, considered trash – It was to those people - Jesus healed and taught and forgave - out of compassion and love he saw only treasure and he calls to do the same. He calls us to reclaim the treasures we often miss in our midst. He calls us to be servants to step out and be people of compassion and justice. In our Old Testament lesson we heard the most famous

teaching of the prophet Micah found in 6:8 – “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

And to do justice is all about compassion. The Hebrew word for justice is mishpat and it’s a word that appears over 412 times in the Old Testament. It’s a word that means to care for those who are often overlooked – those who are discarded. In Zechariah 7:9-10 justice is put this way, “Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.” And so this view of justice is all about how we care for those who are vulnerable – those who feel like they have been thrown away.

I was reading this story from about England two hundred years ago. At that time, it was common to see seven year old boys working below in the coal mines and girls working in the factories. The conditions were miserable but they couldn’t go anywhere else. It was hard and dangerous work and many of them didn’t live to see their eighteenth birthday. The church at that time would offer charity and tom turkeys, little turkeys, for the poor families at holiday time. The church would offer prayers for the little boys and girls working away. Until one day, some members of the church began to think they could do more than just give away turkeys - that having young boys and girls, who were being thrown away and treated like they were nothing – like they were disposable just wasn’t right and so they stood up and with great courage and against great resistance they changed the law so that little boys could no longer work in the coal mines and little girls work in the factory. Now the law required that they go to school instead. And so these church-going folk created a school system to give these children a place to go and different opportunities.

This is compassion and justice which always go hand in hand - for Biblical compassion always leads us to action – whether action through prayer, through volunteering, through serving, through any number of ways as we step out and step up to ask - who are the vulnerable? Who do I need to speak out for? Who do I need to serve this day? Our faith is never about what God is going to do for me but what is going to do through me. For as much as Jesus’ ministry was about getting us to heaven, it was also about getting heaven into us, into our hearts and lives. So that with changed hearts we would live and work for the kingdom as we join with God in proclaiming that where others see trash we see treasure.

And so who would this be? Scripture talk about the vulnerable as the widow, orphans, poor, hungry, stranger, needy, weak and oppressed but we need to ask who are the vulnerable around us today? We would all agree poverty is still a huge issue, that racism while not as overt as it once was is still with us and we would all agree that caring for our children and making sure they have the best education, are healthy, and safe is important but what about more complex issues like immigration or refugees or any other outsiders that we label?

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount the Golden Rule: “In everything, do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” And what’s interesting is that the phrase – “In everything” in the Greek this phrase literally means in every small detail, every person, every part of our lives we are to live this out. And what do we live out? That we imagine, we put ourselves in another’s person’s shoe and ask, “What would I want others to do for me in this situation?” “What must this other person be going through?” This is how we see the treasures of life in other people who are all around us.

So let us recognize that each day is moment for holiness, that God sends people to us - people for us to see differently – people to love differently – whether those people be clerks in our banks and our stores, panhandlers on our streets, teenagers on our corners, or the people who live a few blocks over from us.

For the cross of compassion changes us as we let our faith grow and as we love in a larger way. All throughout scripture from Moses, to Gideon, David, and Solomon, Peter, Paul, and the disciples – there are examples of how a deeper relationship with God changed their lives and left them different people and the world around them a different place. And so our faith and relationship with Christ is meant to give us a wider vision for caring for our world and for one another. Because our faith is at its core all about a relationship that is meant to change all our other relationships.

And so in your bulletin is a quote from mother Theresa which says - *“Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God’s kindness. Kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile.”* May we in this coming week look at ourselves and at others as true treasures of God. May we give thanks for the cross of compassion and God’s tremendous love that redeems and recycles – that changes us day by day. May we live out our faith – our love – our compassion as we step out to be servants to one another and to our world – servants of justice and hope and peace. Amen.