

The Third Sunday in Lent
March 18-19, 2017
Luke 22:47-53

“At the Crossroads: Compassion”

Crossroads: we may move along from day to day, walking along life’s way, feeling at peace. And then it comes: a crossroads, a place of decision. What will we do? Which way will we go? How will we respond? The answers here are not easy. A crossroads can bring us to our knees and cause daunting spiritual pain in our lives. Today, in our Lenten preaching series entitled, “At the Crossroads,” we focus on “Compassion.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

That word, “compassion,” is not actually heard in today’s Gospel lesson, but it is present and visible as Jesus heals the servant of the high priest. In our minds, we think of compassion as an emotion that springs from the heart. We even talk about this as something which is “heart-felt.” But in the ancient world, the heart was not viewed as the seat of emotions. Rather, emotions were understood as visceral, coming from the gut. We talk about this as well: we may have a “gut reaction” to something. I think the ancients were onto something here, and perhaps they knew something we do not. When Scripture talks about the Lord having compassion, it is this deep visceral sense of tenderness that prompts response to need (Matthew 9:36, 14:14; Mark 6:34; Luke 7:13, 10:33 - *σπλαγχνίζομαι*). It is this deep sense of tenderness that moves Jesus to act there in the Garden of Gethsemane. Following the Last Supper (Luke 22:14-23) and Jesus’ agony of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:39-46), the crowd came for Jesus, led by Judas. That is where this portion of the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ begins in today’s Gospel lesson. There had been mounting tension ever since Jesus had entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday (Luke 19:28-40). Jesus’ cleansing of the temple (Luke 22:45-48), and his teaching had drawn the attention and wrath of the religious leaders (Luke 20:1-22:6). That tension was now coming to a head as Jesus is betrayed by one of his own with a kiss. In our own lives, when tension is high and nerves are frayed, we are prone to think only of ourselves. We tend to lash out at others, saying and doing things that are focused on self-preservation. We are not focused on the needs of others at such times. And yet, this is exactly what Jesus is all about! In the commotion and confusion at the time of Jesus’ arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, another of Jesus’ own disciples draws his sword and cuts off the right ear of the high priest’s servant. Luke does not tell us which disciple did this, but John records that it was Simon Peter. John also tells us that the name of the high priest’s servant was Malchus (John 18:10). Jesus does not meet violence with violence, and says to Peter: **“No more of this!”** (Luke 22:51). When tension is high and the heat is on, Jesus shows compassion. He focuses not on himself, but the needs of others. He brings healing in the midst of mob violence, hatred, and injustice.

Jesus’ compassion doesn’t end there in the Garden of Gethsemane. It continues on into the halls of judgment as Jesus stands before the high priest and the Council (Luke 22:54-71), as well as before Pontius Pilate (Luke 23:1-25), all of whom condemn him to death. No angry condemning words come out of Jesus’ mouth then, or even as he is crucified. Instead, he prays for those who kill him (Luke 23:34) and assures the penitent thief that there is a place for him in paradise (Luke 23:43). Such compassion melts our thankless hearts of stone. If it doesn’t, we need to pinch ourselves to see if we are still alive! How can we not be moved to tears of repentance when we hear this story, knowing that it was for sinners like you and me that Jesus suffered and died?

The Lord God calls us to be more than just receivers of his divine compassion made known in Jesus, the Son of God. Having received his compassion and mercy, the Lord God now calls us to be agents and instruments of his compassion in our lives today. We are to share with others what we ourselves have received. If we do not, we become the human version of the Dead Sea – taking everything in, but giving

nothing away. We have the appearance of being alive, but are more dead than alive. And yet, we have a God who brings life from what is dead! This is what Paul tells us in the closing words from today's Epistle lesson: **"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"** (Romans 5:6-8).

I want to share with you a modern-day story of compassion from Jennifer Hills, St. John's Director of Youth and Christian Education, who graciously agreed to share this story with you. "After the Ash Wednesday noon service, I had the privilege to have lunch with a friend. As I was leaving the restaurant, after over-indulging in a huge burrito-in-bowl, a young man approached me. As I was getting into my mommy van, this young man timidly approached me. Too cautious to come too close, nervous to ask, and with fear in his voice he asked: 'Excuse me, miss, can you buy me lunch at Chipotle.' And before I could even think about it, I answered: 'Sorry, I don't have any cash.' That's my go-to out. That's how I avoid getting involved. That's what I say so I don't have to step outside my comfort zone and confront real need. I quickly made judgements based on his appearance. He was clean, well-dressed, possibly skipped school. He didn't look hungry. I excused myself from accepting this opportunity. I allowed myself to make excuses on why this young man didn't receive mercy. I climbed in the van, sat in my seat, adjusted my mirror, and looking straight right back at me was a cross of ashes on my forehead. There Jesus was – looking right back at me. The repentance expressed visibly on my forehead. The mercy I had just received from the Sacrament still in my belly. Confronted. Accused. Guilty. I sat there – staring at my reflection – the cross of Jesus so profoundly marked on my forehead – staring back at me. Every Bible verse I've quoted, tweeted, and shared about helping the least of these; every refugee status I liked; every Scripture I've meditated on... EVERY Word from God poured into me was unleashed and hit me like a tidal wave. There I sat soaking wet in my rebellion. And then God came down. God reached down and shattered my petrified heart. 'And Jesus said, I was hungry and you did not feed me...' (see Matthew 25:31-46)."

"I turned from my mirror to see the young man a few yards away sitting on a bench, quietly crying. I rolled down my window and asked him to meet me in Chipotle. I think he must have ran there because he was there before I drove back up and parked. We stood in line. We didn't talk much. He thanked me repeatedly. After the meal was paid for, I asked for his name and if I could pray for him. Samuel, and yes I could. He thanked me again and walked away."

"Don't think I am good because I am not. If Jesus hadn't shown up on that cross I would have happily driven away and never thought again about Samuel. If Christ's Body and Blood had not been supplied to my malnourished, empty soul would have turned its back and carried on. But Jesus showed up. He always shows up. God comes down and works these unseen miracles every day in his church, in the lives of his people. Every day he takes this worthless lump of clay and uses it to his glory – sometimes I am blessed to see the miracle – often times I overlook it. How gracious and merciful is our Lord to give me a second, a third, a millionth chance to join Him on his mission. What second chances is Jesus offering you? How do you 'excuse' yourself from fully joining Jesus on his mission?"

"Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Joel 2:13).

"Lord, have mercy on our hearts of stone. Forgive us when we choose convenience over compassion, excuses over engagement, and ME over mercy. Turn us towards you so that we may be your people of mercy, compassion, grace, and justice in this world. Empower us daily to seek your kingdom and to join you on your mission of restoration. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen."