If you take an interest in people, you will grow in compassion. A wise pastor gave me this great insight: “Irrigate your soul in the joys and sorrows of other people.” It works. When my soul is dry, and it feels like the weight of the world is on my shoulders, if I find a way to reach out to someone in need, I find myself helped, too.

Compassion is easy if we allow ourselves the luxury of choosing the people for whom we will care. But God’s glory is seen in the scope of God’s compassion: *The LORD is good to all; God has compassion on all God has made* (Ps. 145:9). God cares about God’s enemies, as well as God’s friends. Jesus loved his enemies and did good to those who hated him. *God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous* (Matt. 5:45). God gives life and breath to all people. Some use that breath to praise God; others use it to curse God. God sustains God’s enemies even while they are railing against God. When we show that kind of compassion, we reflect the heart of God.

God’s particular concern for the people of Nineveh stemmed from the fact that they could not tell their right hand from their left. A person who cannot tell their right from their left will soon become hopelessly lost. The reference here is to people who have lost their moral compass. The Ninevites could no longer tell right from wrong. They were in complete moral confusion, and it is for that reason God had compassion on them. The Bible describes this fallen human condition in many ways, but three words will get us to the heart of the problem: blindness, slavery, and death.

Blindness. Paul wrote: *The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God* (2 Cor. 4:4). Blindness is not a refusal to see; it is an inability to see. When someone cannot see the love of God or the grace of God in their life, they are spiritually blind. The Ninevites did not know God, or God’s love and grace: they couldn’t see it until Jonah explained it to them. Reflecting on the blindness inherent in the human condition helps us to grow in patience and enlarges our heart to reflect the heart of God. Recognizing that some people are blind toward God should make us less condemning and more caring; less like Jonah and more like Jesus.

Slavery*.* John wrote: *I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin* (John 8:34). Being a slave to sin means that the sinner can’t stop sinning. He may want to stop, but he doesn’t have the power to stop. She may be able to change the particular form of her sin, but she cannot stop sinning. Slavery is as real as the blindness, but the effects of sin on the human soul go deeper still.

Death. *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins*, wrote Paul (Eph. 2:1). A corpse does not have the power to change its position: it cannot act and it cannot move. By nature we are unresponsive to God. This is why Jesus said, *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them”* (John 6:44).

The human condition is this: spiritually we are all born blind, bound and dead. This biblical teaching about sin, improperly applied can lead to harshness, condemnation and a sense of human worthlessness. That’s how it was with Jonah. He despised the people of Nineveh, and felt that they deserved destruction. His doctrine of sin eroded compassion. God also saw the evil of Nineveh, but God had compassion on the people precisely because they did not know their right hand from their left. Grasping the effect of sin on the human soul helps us to grow in compassion that reflects the heart of God. With that new understanding, we are moved by compassion to act.

Transformation begins with the renewing of our mind, but it does not end there. Compassion involves action, engagement and commitment. Compassion is more than a feeling; it is love in action. Look at what God *did* out of compassion for Nineveh: God called Jonah and sent him; God sent a storm to intercept Jonah; God exposed Jonah’s sin; God prepared a great fish to save Jonah; God caused the fish to spit Jonah onto the beach; God called Jonah a second time; God revealed the message that Jonah would preach; God gave faith and repentance to the people of Nineveh; God changed the heart of the king; God poured out a spirit of prayer among the people; God relented from sending disaster. Compassion is more than feeling sorry for people; it is taking action so that redeeming love may reach them.

The final scene in Jonah’s story involves two contrasting pictures that need to be viewed together. The prophet is alone, isolated in the desert, consumed with his own interests, taken up with the disappointments of his own life. Meanwhile, back in the city, God’s Spirit is at work as a great revival is sweeping through Nineveh. People came to repentance and faith, and when the King of Nineveh heard God’s Word, “*he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust*” (3:6).

The contrast is striking. The king is in the city, actively engaged in praying for the salvation of his people; while Jonah is outside, absorbed with his own problems, watching to see what will happen. The king, in his first hours as a new believer, reflected the heart of God which the prophet, with his lifetime of ministry experience, had yet to discover.

In every church, there are people who are working and people who are watching. Some, like the king, extend themselves in the hope of making a difference. Others, like Jonah, indulge their private arguments with God and position themselves as observers while lives hang in the balance. Hearts grow cold on the sidelines of ministry, but if we engage in what God is doing, we will grow in compassion.

Every day a monk prayed earnestly to see Jesus. One day Jesus appeared to him. At that very moment, the bell on the door of the monastery rang. The monk knew it would be the beggar who came daily asking for bread. The monk faced an agonizing decision: should he leave Jesus and feed the bagger, or stay with Jesus knowing the beggar would come back another day? The monk made his decision. With great reluctance, he left Jesus, opened the door, and gave the beggar some bread. Then, with great sadness he returned to his room, upset that serving the beggar had cost him the greatest moment of a lifetime. To his astonishment, Jesus was still there. The monk fell to his knees in wonder, and Jesus said to him, “If you had not gone, I would not have stayed.”

Compassion means sharing a “common passion” with God. It means caring about people as much as God does, and getting involved in God’s mission to the world. Compassion begins by reflecting on the unique value of every person, and by remembering the blindness, slavery and death that plague the human condition. Those convictions move us to action, for compassion is only realized when we engage with others, work with them and pray for them. Compassion calls us to be like the king of Nineveh, not like the prophet Jonah; to choose the company of those who are working, rather than the comfort of those who are watching. Compassion leads us to a more God-centered life.

Prayer: Lord, open our eyes that we may see you in our brothers and sisters. Lord, open our ears that we may hear the cries of the hungry, the cold, the frightened, the oppressed. Lord, open our hearts that we may love each other as you love us. Renew in us your spirit. Lord, free us and make us one. Amen

Source: Colin Smith, *Jonah: Navigating a God-Centered Life*. Bell & Bain: Glasgow. 2012.

**Reflect God’s Compassion**

Sunday, August 13, 2017

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Jonah 4:6-11

The story of Jonah is about God’s compassion for the world. God cared about Nineveh and actively engaged in redeeming thousands of its people through a staggering initiative of mercy and grace. But, Jonah couldn’t grasp the enormity of God’s compassion. The contrast between the heart of God and the heart of Jonah is striking. God is redeeming sinners as God’s Spirit sweeps through Nineveh, while Jonah is outside the city, absorbed with his own problems, brooding over his lost vine. So God speaks, shining a light into the prophet’s darkness: *You have been concerned about this vine…Should I not be concerned about that great city?* (4:10-11).

Jonah is not wrong to be concerned about the vine. The vine came as a gift from God: it brought comfort, blessing and joy. Jonah received this gift with thanksgiving. The problem is that Jonah’s concern for his own welfare drowned out his compassion for others. Consumed by the unexplained mysteries in his own life, Jonah had no room for concern over the unresolved destinies of others. Absorbed in his questions about the vine, Jonah is strangely unmoved by the plight of thousands facing eternity.

Self-absorbed Christianity is an oxymoron. As we set our sail to navigate a God-centered life, we grow in compassion that reflects the heart of God. The place to begin is with the value God places on every human life. Jesus asks, “*What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul*?” (Mark 8:36). The implication is that one soul is of greater value than the whole world. The world and everything in it will pass away, but a human life is forever and that gives it greater value than the whole world.

Every person you meet is a unique creation of God with a particular calling in life and an eternal future. When you sit next to someone in the bleachers, or stand in line at the grocery store or wait behind someone at a red light, remind yourself that God made this person. There is no one else quite like this person anywhere in the world: there never has been, and there never will be again. God cares about this person and right now, God placed you next to them, so you should care about them too.