

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 7, 2010**

A COMPASSIONATE HEART

Mark 1:40-45

Have you ever heard of EDD? Not ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) but EDD. It stands for Empathy Deficit Disorder, which, according to a psychologist named Douglas LaBier, is a pervasive but overlooked condition with profound consequences in our society today.

People with EDD, says LaBier, are unable to step outside themselves. They are unable to look beyond their own interests and desires, and enter into the experiences of other people. Either they don't know how, or they just don't want to have to deal with unpleasant things in the lives of others.

In many cases, EDD is the result of narcissism, the belief that "it's all about me." People who are obsessed with themselves, with their own needs or wants or desires, their own personal agendas and goals, have no time or interest in understanding and entering into the pain and struggles and experiences of others. They are too busy being concerned about themselves.

Do you know anyone like that? Anyone who suffers from EDD? Would anyone who knows you conclude that you have EDD?

One thing I can say for sure: Jesus did not suffer from empathy deficit disorder. Not a chance! The story we read this morning from Mark 1 is not long. It contains no wasted words. The dialogue is brief. But what emerges from this account of the encounter between Jesus and a man with leprosy is a picture of Jesus in HD (high definition). It is a glimpse of what Jesus was really like.

In his book *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey writes of how teaching a class on the life of Jesus caused him to take a fresh look at Jesus and what He was really like during the days of His life on earth.

What he discovered, he says, is that Jesus "bore little resemblance to the Mister Rogers figure I had met in Sunday school" – safe, nice, reassuring, in a cardigan sweater and sneakers (not that there is anything wrong with Mister Rogers!) – "and was remarkably unlike the person I had studied in Bible college. For one thing, He was far less tame. In my prior image, I realized, Jesus' personality matched that of a Star Trek Vulcan: He remained calm, cool, and collected as He strode like a robot among excitable human beings on spaceship earth."

That, says Yancey, was not what he found in the Gospels. What he found was that "other people affected (Jesus) deeply: obstinacy frustrated Him, self-righteousness infuriated Him, simple faith thrilled Him." To Yancey, "He seemed more emotional and spontaneous than the average person, not less. More passionate, not less" (pages 23).

I don't know for sure what kind of picture of Jesus you have in your mind's eye today. My hope is that we will all see Him clearly today, as He really was and is, perhaps in a way we have never seen Him before.

"Passionate" is the word in Yancey's description that grabs my attention. It is a word that fits Jesus well. Here is a man (and more than a man, of course, because He was "God with us," God in the flesh, fully God and fully man) who was passionate in His love for people. And He showed it in acts of kindness and compassion to people who were hurting and in need. There was no empathy deficit in Jesus.

When this man with leprosy came running to Jesus and begged Jesus to heal him, the Bible says that Jesus was filled with compassion. His heart went out to this poor, suffering man.

Do you know what compassion is? Literally, it means "to suffer with." Webster defines it as "a suffering with another," or "sorrow for the distress or misfortunes of another, with the desire to help."

In *The Book of Virtues*, William Bennett says that to feel the anguish of others and to stand with them in their distress is the essence of compassion. Isn't that what we see in Jesus as He enters into the pain, the hurt, the suffering, the brokenness, the desperation in the lives of people?

Chuck Swindoll says that compassion means being concerned about "people stuff" – things like heartache and hunger, illness and brokenness, insecurity and failure and grief. It means "getting involved in the hurts and needs and lives of others, and wrapping them in arms of love, because people matter so much" (*Come Before Winter*, pp. 259-261).

What I want you to see today is that Jesus incarnated compassion. Jesus embodied compassion. Jesus showed us what compassion looks like. And in doing so, He showed us the heart of God.

David, who was called "a man after God's heart," understood the heart of God. Listen to what he wrote about God:

Psalm 86:15:

You, O LORD, are a compassionate and gracious God,
Slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.

Psalm 103:4, 8, 13-14:

(It is the LORD) who redeems your life from the pit
And crowns you with love and compassion.
The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
Slow to anger, abounding in love.
As a father has compassion on his children
(And treats them with loving kindness),
So the LORD has compassion on those who treat Him

With reverence and honor.

Psalm 145:8-9:

The LORD is gracious and compassionate,
 Slow to anger and rich in love.
 The LORD is good to all;
 He has compassion on all He has made.

David goes on in Psalm 145 to say that the Lord is faithful to all His promises (verse 13), righteous in all His ways (verse 17), and loving toward all He has made (verses 13 and 17). Compassion is God's middle name.

Jesus showed us the compassionate heart of God. Time and again we see it on display in the pages of the New Testament.

We see it in Matthew 9 (the passage of Scripture we will look at more closely next Sunday), where His heart broke for the crowds of people in their spiritual confusion and their aimless wandering through life, for they were like sheep who desperately needed a shepherd to lead them to real life.

We see it in His miraculous provision of food for the crowds who came out to see Him in the countryside, first a crowd of 5,000 men, plus women and children (Mark 6:30-44), and then another crowd of 4,000 (Mark 8:1-9). Jesus knew their hunger was both physical and spiritual, and He responded to both.

We see it, too, in His dealings with a distraught father and a tormented son (Mark 9:14-29), a grieving widow who had lost her only son – and with him, her only means of support (Luke 7:11-17), a pair of blind beggars who wanted to see more than anything else (Matthew 20:29-34), and this leper, who saw Jesus as his last and only hope.

In the Bible, the word “leprosy” refers to a variety of infectious skin diseases. At its worst, it was a terrifying disease. It was a horrible curse. There was no known cure. And it could be highly contagious. Anyone who had it was banished from society, cut off from home and family, from church and community. Lepers were forced to live outside the city or town, often at the town dump. When they had to enter the town for some reason, they were required to call out “Unclean, unclean,” so people would stay away from them. They were social pariahs. They were repulsive in appearance. They were untouchable.

I was surprised to learn that, except in the very early stages of the disease, lepers do not feel physical pain, because the disease deadens their nerve cells, making them unaware of the damage they may do to their own bodies. But even if they don't hurt physically, they will experience almost unbearable suffering – the pain of rejection and isolation from others.

Jesus knew all about the stigma that went along with a disease like leprosy, or, in our day, AIDS. But notice what Jesus did when this man with leprosy called out to Him. Verse 41 says: “Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man.”

Jesus didn't have to do that. He didn't have to touch him. As John Calvin points out, Jesus could have healed the leper by His word alone. That is all it would have taken. He could have done a drive-by healing from a safe distance.

But no, Jesus reached out and actually touched the man. He touched the untouchable. Jesus understood the power of touch, the kind of touch that says: "You matter to me. I care about you. I'm here for you."

Someone has said that there are two kinds of people in the world. There are "Here I am" people. And there are "There you are" people.

"Here I am" people are in the business of calling attention to themselves. By their words and actions, they are constantly saying: "Look at me. Look up to me. Admire me. Meet my needs."

On the other hand, "There you are" people say: "There you are! It is so good to see you. How are you?"

Jesus was a "There you are" kind of person. He cares about you. He cares about every one of us. And He is filled with compassion, with kindness and love, as He looks at you today. He incarnated – perfectly – the compassionate heart of God.

You may wonder why, after Jesus healed the leper, He warned the man not to tell anyone what Jesus had done for him. Instead, He instructed the man to go and show himself to the priest, and to do what was prescribed in the Jewish law (verses 43 and 44). I think Jesus wanted this man's healing to be a witness to the priests – the religious leaders of Israel – of His healing power. It was intended to be a testimony of Jesus' identity as the promised Messiah to the priests, not to the masses at large. On top of this, Jesus didn't want the masses to get the idea that He was just a miracle-worker who could heal all their diseases. While He did heal many, that was not the primary purpose of His incarnation.

But the healed man disobeyed the word of Jesus. He couldn't contain himself and he spread the news throughout the countryside. It is completely understandable, isn't it? But it is also an example of the law of unintended consequences. By telling everyone what Jesus had done for him, this man unintentionally hindered the ministry of Jesus. He made it impossible for Jesus to come into the towns openly. Instead, Jesus had to stay out in "lonely places" (verse 45).

It is because Jesus knew what would happen if the word got out that He told this man not to tell anyone what Jesus had done for him. Whatever else we may learn from this, it serves as a testimony to us that obedience to the Lord is better than praise.

So what are we to take away from this portion of God's Word? At least these two things:

First, Jesus embodied the compassionate heart of God. He was compassion incarnate. There was not a trace of empathy deficit disorder in His life. No EDD then or now. Which means that Jesus cares about us. Jesus cares about you. Whatever you're going through, whatever you may be struggling with in life, whatever kind of pain or suffering or hurt you're experiencing, Jesus cares about you. No matter where you have been or what you have done, no one is outside the bounds of God's loving care and concern. No one. In a sense, of course, we are all lepers – spiritually – because we have all been deformed by the cancer of sin. But God, through the saving work of His Son on our behalf, through the atoning death of Jesus on the cross, has reached out to us in His compassion and love, and made us (all who belong to Him by faith) His adopted children. Not only did Jesus enter into the suffering of humanity, not only did He “suffer with” us with a heart of compassion, He suffered *for* us on the cross. And, just as He was filled with compassion for this leper who cried out to Him, He is filled with compassion for you today. Jesus cares about you. Please don't ever forget that.

Second, God wants us to have a heart like His. God wants each of us to have a compassionate heart. He wants us to be people of passion and compassion. Just like Jesus.

This does not mean that God wants us to take on burdens we are not meant to carry. It doesn't mean it is your job to solve everybody's problems or to take responsibility for things you're not responsible for. Even Jesus had boundaries in His life. Make sure you have healthy boundaries in your life.

But God does want us to be kind and compassionate to one another (Ephesians 4:32). He does want us to show His compassion to people around us. When Paul describes the proper wardrobe for Christians in Colossians 3, the first item on his list is compassion. We are to clothe ourselves, he says, with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. We are to bear with one another and to forgive whatever grievance we may have against one another, just as God has forgiven us. And above all, we are to put on the garment of love – His love – that keeps all the others in place (3:12-14).

EDD – empathy deficit disorder – is incompatible with the compassionate heart of our God and Savior. May our hearts be like His. May the compassion Jesus embodied be expressed in our lives.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.