

“The Ripple Effect: Compassion Unleashed”

One day a woman finds out she's going to have a baby. When that happens, you realize there is so much you don't know. There is an online ask-the-pregnancy-expert resource available nowadays, written by a man, oddly enough. And here's the first entry. "Question: I'm two months pregnant now. When will my baby move? Answer: With any luck, right after he finishes college."

Well this woman finds out she is going to have a baby, and then that day comes, and she gives birth to a little boy. And she and her husband are thrilled. They tell their friends. They thank God. But they gradually begin to discern things aren't quite right. He doesn't respond normally to visual cues, doesn't seem to recognize them. And eventually they realize their little boy cannot see.

They live in a part of the world where there are no resources, no classes, no books in Braille, no help. He has no other children to play with. He's not going to get married. He doesn't hold a job. They worry about what's going to happen to him when they die. He has to beg for a living, and he does this year after year. And there are people all around him and nobody seems to really notice him until one day, a group of religious people are walking past him, and he hears them talk about him.

One of them says, **"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"** His story is actually told in the Bible in the Gospel of John. And the disciples asked this question of their rabbi. Strange question to us... **"Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" John 9:2 NIV** If you're born blind, how could your sin have caused it? But there was a teaching among some rabbis in that day that it was possible for a baby to be born sinful, that if a mother-to-be entered into a heathen temple, the fetus was actually judged to be guilty of the sin of idolatry. It was possible, they believed, for a fetus to sin.

Now, if you think somebody is disabled or suffering because of their sin, then you're kind of off the hook from having to help out. You keep them at arm's length. It's odd how religion can actually make people less compassionate.

This still happens all the time. Christians demonstrate outside of abortion clinics, calling down judgment; keeping women with unwanted pregnancies at arm's length instead of extending compassion and healing by loving them and helping them find other solutions. That's why ministries like Life Choices are so great....because Life Choices is about Christians being loving, not religious, toward women with unwanted pregnancies,.

So back to the story...the religious people asked their question. Now their teacher is a former carpenter from Nazareth named Jesus. And Jesus is actually the one who noticed this blind man in the first place. In fact, the story starts out...it's in John 9:1, **"As He went along, He saw a man blind from birth." NIV.** What matters begins with what you see as you go along. As Jesus went along he saw peoples' needs. And the more you walk with Jesus, the more you see what Jesus sees.

There is an old song...you may not know it but I remember it from growing up in Sunday school... Be careful, little eyes, what you see.

***Be careful, little eyes, what you see, Be careful, little eyes, what you see,
For the Father up above is looking down in love, Oh be careful, little eyes, what you see.***

That song kind of creeped me out...it sounded kind of *big brother*. You know? It's like getting this from God (gestures "keeping my eyes on you"). "Be careful, little eyes. Be careful, little feet. Be careful, little hands, what you do." But there is another way of thinking about that song. Better, to my way of thinking; *Be careful, little eyes, that you see what Jesus sees. Be careful, little feet, that you go where Jesus would go. Be careful, little hands, that you do what Jesus' hands would do.*"

Well Jesus sees this guy. And the disciples ask, *"Who sinned, this man or his parents?"* And Jesus replies, "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for somebody to blame, and we do that when there is suffering because it gives us an out." But Jesus is saying, "There is no cause and effect here. Look instead for what God can do." That's what we're doing in this *Ripple Effect* series. Look for what God can do through us and how that will change the world as our simple acts of compassion move out beyond us...as it ripples out into the world.

Now just to finish out this story, Jesus heals this man, even though it is the Sabbath and healing is not allowed by law. This ticks off the Pharisees and they hold a congressional hearing of sorts to figure it all out. They end up condemning Jesus as a heathen for breaking the law and condemning the blind man for believing that God, through Jesus, was involved in the healing. The blind man at the beginning of the story is both physically and spiritually blind, but by the end of the story he is healed of both while the Pharisees, who claim to see the ways of the Lord, do not see God at work right in front of them.

Let's just think for a minute how people viewed the blind man. When the disciples look at this guy, they see

an interesting theological discussion that makes them feel superior. When his neighbors look at him, they see an eyesore. When the Pharisees look at him, they see a violated Sabbath, a broken rule. Jesus looks at him, and Jesus sees a child of God who has suffered intensely who could yet be redeemed by the power of God to a level of spiritual insight and courage that would stun the world. Nobody ever looked at sick people like Jesus looked at sick people. "Be careful, little eyes, what you see. Careful, little feet, where you go. Careful, little hands, what you do."

What amazes me about Jesus was that he had this amazing compassion for everyone he encountered. Any time Jesus met someone, he spotted their need and responded to it! He was filled with compassion for the hungry, sick, the lost, the marginalized, the distraught, the broken, even to those who crucified him. His compassion led him to action and we call that action healing. Jesus responded in ways that bring healing and wholeness. Often it was physical healing, just like the blind man in our story today. It always involved spiritual healing. Like the story of the woman who was about to be stoned for adultery. They bring her to Jesus and he invites those who condemn her who are without sin to cast the first stone. As they crowd disperses, Jesus offers healing. There's nothing wrong with her physically. He heals her from her shame, from her past, her guilt and her old way of life.

This is how Jesus sees people...through eyes of compassion. And the question is just begging to be asked? How do you see people? How do I see people? And the truth for me is that I am not sure I want to see people the ways Jesus does! I feel for people who are suffering or hurt or any kind of sick. That's what I do, I feel for them. And many times that is where it stays because **sympathy is safe. Compassion gets uncomfortable.**

One day, a man with a withered hand came to Jesus. It was on a Sabbath. And there was a crowd around. And a lot of them were religious experts. And Jesus asked, "What do you think I ought to do, guys? It's a Sabbath day, and here's a man who's suffering intensely and I can help him. It's a Sabbath. What do you think? Is the Sabbath for doing good or isn't it? What do you say?"

And here's the suffering person who could be helped with Jesus. And he waits for these people to say a word and they say nothing. They're silent. And the text says Jesus **"looked around at them in anger...deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts."** And I don't know about you, but that's kind of sobering for me because, you know, I can read it and think, *Man, I would have spoken up for that guy.* But how often are there suffering people in my world, and I just want to be preoccupied with my own little life and I'm silent? Little eyes, little feet, little hands. What do you see? Where do you go? What do you do?

In my family, it's my wife, Jennifer, who is really the compassionate one. When she sees the need, she looks for ways to do something, to respond in ways that bring comfort or healing. That's what compassion is. Seeing people like Jesus sees them. Going to the people Jesus went to. Doing the things Jesus did.

Jesus even tells us that this is exactly what he wants us to do...this is the ripple effect...this is how he is going to change the world. **"Very truly I tell you, all who have faith in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father"** (John 14:12 TNIV)

We don't do greater things on our own. We do them in Christ. Jesus is saying that where there was once just one of him, now he is alive in millions of us and the ripple effect of his compassion through us is exponentially greater.

The ministry of the early church was very much in tune with Jesus' compassion. He hands His mission off to this little ragtag community called *the Church*. And it begins to grow, but not because it can out-argue everybody and convince people of their beliefs. Not because it figures out how to win the culture wars. But because it saw the people around them as Jesus did and put his compassion into action.

Oddly enough, sickness and suffering and the Church's response to it became a major part of how it is that this movement of Jesus transformed the Roman Empire. A guy by the name of Rodney Stark, who is a sociologist of religion and a historian, writes about how, at two points in early centuries, about 165 A.D. and then about 251 A.D., there were major epidemics in the Roman empire. It might have been smallpox. But they wiped out between a third and a quarter of the entire population of the Roman Empire. Now you think about that. Put that in our day. Imagine 75 million or 100 million people dying in the US because of an epidemic we were powerless to stop. Imagine the fear or hysteria. And what the people did in those days is

probably not much different than what we would do. People would push sufferers away. They fled from their dearest, spouses, parents from their children. Throwing them into roads before they were dead and treating unburied corpses like dirt, hoping to avert disease.

But then there is this little community that remembered Jesus cared for the sick. "We follow One who would touch lepers when nobody else would touch them, who healed people when He got in trouble. And now we're His body. Careful, little eyes, what you see. Careful, little feet, where you go. Careful, little hands, what you do.

And they would take people in, even people who were not part of their community, even people who didn't believe like them. They would care for the sick and dying, even at the cost of their own lives. The truly revolutionary aspect of Christianity was the creation of a movement of people who lived with Jesus and found themselves doing what it was that Jesus did.

Stark writes this: "Those teachings of Jesus... 'Love your neighbor as yourself. It's more blessed to give than to receive. Whatever you have done to the least of these, you have done to Me.'... These were not just slogans. People actually did this stuff. Members did nurse the sick, even during epidemics. There was no other community like this. They did support orphans and widows and the elderly and the poor."

And this just kept going on and on. And I'll tell you what. The world was starving for this then. The world is starving for this now. Because there is a lot of sickness going on in our world. And there are some major diseases we can do something about.

350-500 million people will get malaria this year and 100 million of them will die from it (most of those are children under 5). In Africa, there are 10 new cases of Malaria every second and every 30 seconds a child in Africa dies from it. 40% of the earth's population lives in malaria endemic countries and it's treatment consumes nearly 40% of these countries' public health resources. Malaria has been brought under control and even eliminated in parts of Asia, Europe and the Americas, but in Africa, infections have increased over the last 3 decades.

But Malaria is both preventable and treatable. And we can be compassionate agents of healing. The United Methodist Church has partnered up with the NBA and Gates Foundation and others to form Nothing but Nets, which purchases and distributes treated bed nets. You can turn sympathy to compassion. A net costs \$10 and will be big enough for 4 people to sleep under it and it will preserve health and bring peace of mind to people who sleep in fear.

Tuberculosis. What percentage of the world's population do you think has been infected with the TB bacillus? World Health Organization estimates...thirty-three percent. You think about that. One-third of the world's population. And what that means is, there will be 100 or 200 million people who develop full-blown cases of tuberculosis this year. It will be the number one cause of death for people who have AIDS and whose immune systems have been compromised.

And the AIDS pandemic is just real hard to get our arms around. I'll just give you one picture of this. If all the AIDS orphans in Africa, every one of them somebody's son, somebody's daughter, somebody God loves... If all the AIDS orphans in Africa were to join hands, they would stretch from San Francisco all the way to New York, all the way back to San Francisco, all the way back to New York, all the way back to San Francisco, all the way back to New York and then halfway across the... five and a half times across the country. One child after another child after another child who will not have a mom or a dad.

Be careful little eyes... Part of the challenge of following Jesus is to open our eyes to the world around us! I am so tempted to either believe that these needs don't exist or that I can't really do anything about it.

I remember my first trip to Nicaragua with the Rainbow Network. It was back in 2001. We arrived in Managua, a city of over almost 2 million people. Rainbow Network transported us across Managua in pickups. We were literally standing in the back of the trucks, holding on to cage bars. I'll never forget the scene. Every stop light had little children standing in between the lanes begging. Their parents would send them out to do it. When the lights turned green, the kids just stayed where they were, because to leave the lane meant giving it up. So we went through stop lights at 40 miles an hour on green lights with kids standing on the streets, just a few feet from being hit. I was beginning to see what it really means to be desperate.

In the areas of rural Nicaragua, where Rainbow Network focuses it's work, malnutrition rates for children are at 70-80%. Rainbow Network's footprint now encompasses over 50,000 people in rural Nicaragua and the malnutrition rate among children is between 6-8%.

When I hear of the immensity of the need, I can get overwhelmed by how little I can do. But all we have to do is get from where we are right now to just the next step. Just make a little splash! Nobody can do everything. But with Jesus, everybody can do something. That first trip to Nicaragua opened my eyes to the needs of people. I saw what Jesus sees. I could no longer be blind or ignorant about the needs of people in Nicaragua and I knew there was something I could do. And every month since, we make a little splash. And if you want to

do something to bring healing, to make a splash, you can do it from in front of your computer for any of the things I was just talking about.

For Nothing but Nets, Tuberculosis or Aids go to:

www.umc.org/site/c.lwL4KnN1LtH/b.4407745/k.5B59/Global_Health_Initiative.htm

www.nothingbutnets.net

Nicaragua – www.rainbownetwork.org

Jesus didn't limit his compassion and we live in an age where we are able to bring healing to people on the other side of the world. Many of you are already doing something through any number of wonderful ministries around the world. Through your gifts and their work, you are bringing healing and wholeness to people. And I want to invite you to pray about the things I have lifted up today. Maybe God is asking you to start or to do more.

So how do we do this in our everyday life with people in our community? How do live out the compassion of Christ right here? I want you to remember the song...*Be careful little eyes...*...as you go through your day, ask Jesus to give you eyes to see what he sees. Tell him you'd like to see the world as he sees it. Then where do you see a need? He'll bring stuff to your eyes. Maybe there is an article about suffering and instead of looking at something else, you read it and ask, "God is there anything here you want me to know about?" Maybe you hear about some need a friend has or a neighbor has and you find out there is a ministry for that need and you get involved. Maybe instead of ignoring needy people, you engage them. If there is an issue you see and it gets under your skin, pay attention to that.

"Be careful, little feet, where you go." You know, sometime take a next step in learning about what God is doing in the world. Go where Jesus would go. Read the Gospels again, then ask yourself, where in this community would Jesus go to meet people? In your program today you received a Serve the World brochure. It lists local agencies and ministries that you can get involved with. Go visit and see what God is doing. Go down to the Salvage Yard, and hang out for an evening. Visit with people and show them what acceptance and love look like. The Salvage Yard is one ministry of our church that really is meeting people where they are...disconnected from God and not comfortable in church. Go to Watered Gardens or Crosslines or Community Clinic or any of the places on this list. Go and see.

And then this week, "Be careful, little hands, what you do." Try a one-time experiment. Just give something a shot. Try serving in some area, just one time, and see if it resonates in your heart because you can't know where God might call you if you don't at least try. And you know, we're trying to put as much information as we can to make it available. The connection form does that every week for us, and again, we have the serve the world brochure for you this week.

I want to wrap up by noting that Saint Paul's is a great church and there are so many of you who are out there making splashes in our community! Your response to Bright Futures and Star Shop; Hearts and Hammers Day; Watered Gardens; helping people you know in need; and so much more is amazing! I just think we need to acknowledge that lots of people are making ripples in our community!

And while it's true that none of us can meet all the needs, it's also true that Jesus doesn't just call some of us to demonstrate his compassion to our world. He calls all of us. We will all encounter sickness and suffering. We can't do everything, but we can all do something...and that would be some amazing good news for our world! Be careful, little eyes to really see; little feet to really to; little hands to really do!