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Reflections: The Call to a Compassionate Life

Job 2:11-13

For those of you who do not know me, I am Debbie Manning and I have been on staff as part of the Congregational Care team for the past 12 years. I am also a seminary student and before John Crosby left for his sabbatical, he called me up and asked if I would like to preach this summer. Well, the first thing that you learn in seminary is to know your audience. I know John a bit and he is a calm and cool kind of guy. So, very calmly, I said, "Well, Yes John I would really like to do that. Thank you." (Inside I was very excited about the chance to preach!) Originally, we were to do a series this summer on the fruits of the Spirit. When John said that I would be preaching on kindness, I blurted out, "Yes, I love kindness, John, I can do kindness...I don't mean that I am so kind, I just know a lot of kind people." In that moment, I realized that I had lost my cool and that John was probably thinking, "What in the world was I thinking when I asked this woman to preach?" But seriously, I am very happy to be here with you all, and I do really appreciate the chance to practice all I have learned in my preaching classes!

A big part of what I do here at CPC is running the Lay Care Ministry. What is the Lay Care ministry, you might ask! And wouldn't I love to tell you. Lay Care is a ministry where lay people just like you, are trained to minister to those in our church community that are hurting. Under the big umbrella called the Lay Care Ministry, we have people who are involved in Grief Recovery, Hospital Ministry, Prayer and Healing, Senior Visitation, One-on-One Support, Helping Hands and Care Groups, funeral and memorial committees. These Lay Care ministers go through ten intensive weeks of training, a training that equips them to go out and comfort others. Do you know what above all is key to being a great Lay Care minister? It is to be able to simply show up and be a listening, loving presence to those in need. That's it. Show up. It's not necessary to have a multitude of scripture memorized, you don't have to have the answers (you won't and you can't), you don't have to have tons of experience praying out loud with others. You need a heart for God and a heart for others. That's it, show up and be a listening, loving presence. We spend two full sessions on listening. There are no sessions on how to give good advice or on memorizing the answers to the tough "why" questions. Our motto is we do the caring, God does the curing. No matter what area of ministry a person ministers in, they all have one thing in common--their job is to show up and comfort those that are experiencing pain and suffering.

Suffering is a part of life. Suffering is a part of your life and it is a part of my life. Suffering is the reality of the world that we live in. We have all experienced or seen the pain and suffering in broken relationships, illness and disease, death and loss of dreams--what we thought and hoped our lives would be. I don't know much, but what I do know is that when I walk into a two-year-old's hospital room several hours after a diagnosis of cancer and two shell-shocked, weeping parents ask me why--why would God let this happen, I don't go down the path of trying to answer the question, because to tell you the truth, I don't have the answer and neither do you.

What about when I meet with the mom who, after 20 years of marriage and 4 young boys, has her husband walk in one night and tell her he's not happy, walks out, and never returns. She, too, has moments of crying out to God asking why? Why me? Why us? I don't have the answer. What do I say to the parents and siblings of an 18-year-old boy while we sit and wait for the divers to find his body in the lake? Their son and brother had just drowned. There are no words of wisdom or great advice to take away their pain. But what I can do, what we can do, is simple—show up and be a loving, listening presence.

We are created in the image of God, God of compassion and mercy-- the great comforter. Therefore we are called to live the compassionate life; we are called to be a Godly comforter. Throughout scripture, not only is the compassionate nature of God revealed, but there is a clear command for each of us to lead compassionate lives. Micah 6:8, what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and love mercy. Ephesians 4:32, be kind and compassionate to one another. Colossians 3:12, Clothe yourselves with compassion. We are designed to be in relationship with others, and when life gets tough we are to be comforters to one another. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." It is pretty clear that we are to be comforters. But what I wanted to talk about today is what it looks like to be Godly comforters.

I think that in the book of Job, through his friends, we have a great manual for the "Do's and Don'ts" of being a comforter. Here's a run down on the story of Job. Job is a guy who has it all—family, wealth, and prestige. He was a faithful man of God. He did all the right things. But Job loses it all; he suffers greatly and wrestles with the apparent injustice of all that has happened to him. His friends come to comfort him. Here is where we pick up the story. Listen to Job, chapter 2, verses 11-13: "When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their head. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was." Okay, so far so good. Upon learning about Job's suffering these three friends come to sympathize with him and to comfort him. For seven days and seven nights, Job's friends sit with him in the traditional ritual of mourning. There is a deep value in their silence. These friends, these comforters had no need to talk. Why talk when words are useless? What could they possibly say that could be of comfort? "How are you doing" sounds incredibly inadequate when the guy just lost his children, his servants, his livestock, his herdsman, and his home. And don't forget he was covered with painful sores. What they did do in those first seven days was simply show up and be a compassionate presence with Job. I imagine in those long days and nights of insufferable pain and fear, Job knew that they were there and sensed their compassion. He wasn't alone!

Unfortunately at this point in the story, the "do's" of comforting turn quickly into the "don'ts" of comforting. Out of the depth of his suffering, Job cries out in anguish, cursing his birth, claiming that life has lost its meaning and that God has forsaken him. Now, these three friends, considered to be wise and well versed on the teachings of Moses, David, Solomon and the prophets, knew the rules. They knew that when Job was suffering, it was somehow his own

fault, his parents' fault, or the fault of his children. There had to be a reason for Job's suffering, an answer to the question why. Someone had to be blamed. For the next thirty chapters, these three friends just nail the guy, trying to convince him that he was to blame for his suffering. In chapter four, the first friend starts by saying, "Job will you be annoyed if I give you a little advice? Happy is the person whom God corrects. Do not resent when God corrects your sins." Personally, if I were in Job's shoes, I am guessing that I would be feeling more irritated than comforted. I might be thinking, "Easy for you to say as you sit with your life and health intact, I am the one who just lost everything and am lying here in incredible pain." In chapter eight, friend number two, asks Job if he is finally done with his windy speech and goes on to say that God never fails to do what is right and that your children must have sinned against God and God punished them with the punishment that they deserve. All ten of them. I am starting to understand why Job is getting angrier and angrier. In chapter 11, friend number 3, advises Job to put his heart right, reach out to God and repent of your evil ways. These guys, with a spirit of arrogance and condescension try to shame Job into "getting over" or denying his pain. All three of these "comforters" claimed to know God's reason for Job's suffering-that seems a little gutsy to assume the voice of God. These guys, who started on a mission of comforting a friend in a time of pain and suffering, ended up condemning him by taking on the role of God and assuming that they knew the answers to the question of suffering. Instead of comforting Job, they just heaped more pain on him.

What can we learn from Job's friends in this story in regards to comforting others? I think that there are several take aways for us. Let's start with what not to do. First of all, don't talk a lot, say as little as possible. As comforters we are not there to give advice or share our wonderful wisdom; it won't take away the pain. Besides, we risk saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. Have you ever in a moment of attempting to give words of comfort put your foot in your mouth? I have a friend who was delivering a meal to someone who had breast cancer. In an attempt to say something, as she was leaving, her parting words were, "Rest in peace." She was mortified! Stick with that saying, "less is more." Secondly, don't assume you know how people feel. You have not experienced their particular pain and suffering. And along those lines, don't tell people how they should feel. You don't know how they feel and it is simply not your role. Third, don't make assumptions about God's plan behind the pain and suffering. We are not God! Sadly, as Christians we sometimes try to explain God's plan in an effort to comfort someone. One of my favorites is when Christians say, "God is trying to teach you something." When we make statements like this we actually end up hurting others. Does God teach us and grow us during times of pain and suffering? Yes, but those are simply the wrong words at the wrong time. We see some of this same spirit and behavior demonstrated from Job's friends, as well, and there is simply no place for that in the compassionate life that we are called to lead.

What do we do as comforters? We are to show up and be a loving, listening presence. Job's friends demonstrated that well in the first seven days. Be quick to listen and slow to speak. In our need to "take away" people's pain we are often quick to give insights and advice. We can't take away people's pain. Show compassion through your presence, prayer, and understanding spirit. These are the things that make people feel comforted not only by us, but by God. I have a movie clip, that I think shows a great example of being present and loving someone in the midst of their pain and suffering. The movie is *Steel Magnolias* and it centers on a group of women who have shared life. In this scene these women come together to comfort their friend as she grieves the loss of her daughter. Watch.

It is really a pretty simple concept--as comforters we are to show up and be a loving, listening presence, just like Job's friends did initially. Admittedly, it is sometimes hard in practice. In our humanness, we have this need to have the answers and try to take away the pain of those who are struggling. But the truth is that we don't have the answers to the "Why?" question and we can't take away the pain. Only God has the answers and only God can do the healing. That is the truth. And when we truly understand that, it really frees us to show up in all sorts of circumstances, trusting that it isn't about me and my great wisdom, but about a loving God, full of compassion and mercy--the great comforter. There is lots of pain and suffering in our world; we are surrounded by it. As people of God, we have to step up and step in to the pain with others, even when we have nothing to say.

I see you guys, this community, do this all the time; every day I get to see people who are "loving God and loving others," step out of their own lives into the lives of those who are suffering, to bring comfort. I see it when a couple of people start a group for parents of children with emotional and mental health issues--Grace and Hope for our Children--a place for people to share the journey, sit in the pain together, supporting one another through some really tough stuff, by just being there, listening and loving one another. I see it when a two-year-old dies, and this community surrounds this family as they walk through incredible grief and loss. From the moms from Mom's morning to the Children's ministry and childcare staff, people have stepped up and out to love and comfort this family; it is an amazing thing. I see it when broken and hurting, people step into that prayer room and are surrounded by those prayer warriors not afraid to step into the pain with others--just being there to comfort, trusting God to do the healing. I see when hundreds of you guys, over the years, have brought meals to those that are hurting, sick, and dying--that is what it means to be a comforter. Show up and love others. It's everywhere. Life is hard and we all will have or are suffering in one way or another. For those of us that step in as comforters, it is not about the words; it's about God's compassion for His children, seen through our presence. We show up and love them and listen. I am convinced that a big part of following Jesus Christ is choosing to live the compassionate life.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.