

Date: 18 February 2024
Services: *Across the Diocese*
Series: Gazing on the Goodness of God
Title: Compassionate
Passage: Exodus 34:4-7;

Welcome to our first Lenten study as we look at the goodness of God, unpacking that verse from Exodus 34: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness." Our attribute this week is God's compassion, the compassionate God. Jesus said, "Be compassionate just as your heavenly father is compassionate." Be compassionate because God is compassionate; that's how God describes himself, a God who cares. If we claim to be a child of God, we too should care. Our hearts should be one that cares for other people.

So when you see a homeless person and you buy them a coffee, or you see a woman on the bench and she looks sad and you stop to say, "Are you okay?" That is compassion. When you hear of a work colleague in need and you reach out to them, when you spontaneously do some extra groceries for somebody in need, that is compassion. Just being there in times of tragedy, in times of trial when someone is hurting, just showing up and sitting and listening and weeping with those who weep, that is compassion. Sponsoring a compassion child, be concerned for the marginalized and the poor across the globe, that is compassion. Inviting someone to Christianity Explored because recognizing their deepest need is to know Jesus, that is compassion.

The question is not, "When can I show compassion?" The question is, "Are we compassionate people? Do we feel other people's pain? Do we enter into their suffering? Do we make sacrifices to help them?" Rosaria Butterfield says, "Compassion means entering the suffering of another in order to lead the way out." So compassion isn't just seeing a need; it's feeling that need. And it's not just feeling that need; it's actually doing something about it, entering into their suffering, getting our hands dirty.

Now, please don't tell me that you know, "I'm not a compassionate person," or "Compassion isn't my gift," because compassion is not a gift; it's an expectation. It's part of our Christian character. Being compassionate is what it means to be human because we're created in the image of God, and God describes himself as compassionate. "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God." Isn't that fascinating, that compassion is the first attribute of God? It's not love, kindness, humility, gentleness, or patience. He is all those things, but the first word he uses to describe himself is compassionate. (James 5:11)

"The Lord is full of compassion." Compassion is a beautiful word, described as a concern for the suffering of others and a desire to alleviate their suffering. It's sympathy with action. The word is actually the word "womb." It's that tender feeling of a mother towards the child that she's just birthed. It's that motherly feeling for the vulnerable, the dependent, and the precious loved ones. That's how God feels about us. God gave birth to us, and so we are his children, and we are dependent on him, and his heart is full of compassion.

Compassion is actually an emotive word, a feeling word. It's sometimes translated as "deeply moved." So when Jesus saw the crowd who were harassed and helpless, it says that Jesus had compassion on them. His heart went out, actually, that's too weak. Literally, it's his guts were wrenched. He had this gut-wrenching, deep-seated emotional response to people in need. In the pit

of his stomach, he felt for people in pain. He had this longing to help, whatever the cost. That's how God feels about us. Compassion is an emotive word, but it's also an action word. Jesus didn't just see a need, but he felt it, and then he acted. He did something to help.

Here's our big idea: God's compassion is his care for the suffering and his mercy towards sinners because every human being is both a sufferer and a sinner, and God cares, and God has mercy.

Let's start with

1. Care for the sufferers.

I hope you know that God sees you in your hurts and your heartaches. God is burdened by your sorrows and your sadness. God feels your pain. In the book of Exodus, God's people were slaves in Egypt, treated so badly and harshly. They cried out to God, and the Bible tells us that God heard their cries, God saw them, and God rescued them.

That's his compassion, and God brought them up out of Egypt and delivered them from oppression. That's his compassion, and God promised them a land flowing with milk and honey. But just like spoiled brats on that journey, God's people whined and complained because life wasn't perfect. Have you ever seen a spoiled brat in a shopping centre, and you think of this poor mother, this poor father who is being treated badly by this child who is just whining and complaining and shouting, "Life's not fair"? Why does that parent put up with that? Because they love them, and they're full of compassion toward them. That is God towards us. Just as God's people complained, "Oh, we're better off in Egypt, why can't we go back there?" God provided for their needs. He provided food and water and shoes that did not wear out. That's his compassion.

The word for compassion is sometimes translated as "merciful," not getting what we do deserve. Where God's people deserve nothing from God, but he provided, and he cared, and he protected them. They forgot God, but God did not forget them. Isaiah 49:1-15 says, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you," says God. God will not forget us, no matter what we're going through, even when we're like spoiled brats.

And then God took on flesh and came into our world in the person of Jesus Christ, and he stepped into our world of suffering and sorrow. And his heart, the heart of Jesus, was a heart of compassion. We often ask, "What would Jesus do?" A different question is, "How would Jesus feel?" How did Jesus feel? And the answer is, he felt compassion. Matthew 9:36, "When Jesus saw the crowd, he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd."

Did you notice that verse 36? When Jesus saw the crowd, so that's where compassion starts. It starts with seeing, opening our eyes to people in need. Jesus saw people. He saw the sick who needed physical healing, he saw the poor with financial needs, he saw the lonely with relational needs, he saw the hurting with emotional needs. He sees people. That's the style of compassion. But Jesus actually sees people as they really are. He strips off the masks, and he's not fooled by the facade. He sees the real needs.

He says he saw the crowds; he had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Those two words, harassed and helpless, are two great words. "Harassed" means to be burdened or to be weighed down by stress and sadness. The word

"helpless" means to be powerless, unable to rescue yourself. The word actually is "cast down." If you've ever seen sheep, and they are cast down, it means that they're on their backs with all four legs up in the air. The thing about a cast-down sheep with all four legs in the air is they are incapable of up righting themselves. It's impossible for them to rescue themselves. That's how Jesus Christ saw people: harassed and helpless. It's a pretty good description of every single one of us because outwardly people may seem calm and comfortable, successful and shiny, but Jesus looks into our souls and says, "All people are harassed, helpless, broken, burdened, and weary, full of worries."

And when Jesus saw these people, he felt compassion. He had this gut-wrenching longing to care for them, and we see Jesus interact with people like that throughout the Gospels. Jesus shows compassion towards people. Let me just read a few verses to you:

Matthew 14:14 - When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, and he healed their sick.

Matthew 15:30 - Great crowds came to Jesus, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and laid them at his feet. And Jesus healed them. The people were amazed. Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion on these people." It wasn't just the crowd; it was individuals.

John 11 - When his friend Lazarus died, we're told Jesus saw Mary and Martha weeping, and he was deeply moved in spirit.

That's the compassion word. He saw their pain; he felt their pain. One of my favourites is the Weeping Widow in Luke 7. If you know that story (Luke 7:1), Jesus went to a town called Nain. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. Imagine that, this poor woman; she lost her husband and now she's burying her son. She lost everything: her future, her security, her protection, her hope. She was harassed, broken, burdened, and we're told in verse 13 that when the Lord saw her. I loved that. The religious people didn't see her; the Pharisees were tut-tutting, "Why is he bothering with this woman?" Imagine that feeling of smugness and superiority and self-righteousness. Have you ever experienced that amongst Christians, amongst the church, they're saying, "Why would we get our hands dirty with someone like her? Other people can help her, not me." But Jesus sees her, and he saw her heartache, and we're told in verse 13, his heart went out to her. That's the compassion word. His guts were moved; his stomach was churned. He felt for this woman in pain. Yes, of course, she's a sinner, but she's also a sufferer, and he cares for sufferers.

But compassion is not just a feeling word; it's an action word. So Jesus did something about it. He went up, verse 14; he touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, get up," and he brought him back to life. Friends, God is compassionate. God sees your pains, your hurt, your heartaches, your sadness, your sorrows, your distress, your discouragement. God saw you when you were weak and wandering. God saw you when you didn't want a bar of him. God sees you in the future when you are suffering and in trials and in tragedy and heartache, and he'll always be a God of compassion towards you.

I don't know what burdens you're carrying right now. I don't know what sorrows and sufferings you will face in the future, but I do know this: that your God will always be full of compassion. God never promised to relieve your troubles; sometimes he allows us to go through pain and suffering to refine us, shape us, and conform us to the likeness of Christ. But please never doubt his compassion towards you.

But here's the confronting bit: what did Jesus say? "Be compassionate just as our heavenly father is compassionate." So, friends, we are called now; we're commanded to show compassion towards other people because that's what God is like. Colossians 3:12, "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, what's the first thing we're to clothe ourselves in? Clothe yourself with compassion. Care for other people." Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind and compassionate towards one another." James, chapter 1, "Religion that our God and Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress." So, as people who have experienced the compassion of God, we are commanded to show compassion to other people.

One of the most famous parables that Jesus told is the parable of the Good Samaritan. Do you remember that? Luke 10:25, a man is robbed and beaten and left in the gutter to die, and a priest, a religious person, a Christian, and a Levite, a worship leader, an organist in the church, happened to walk on by. What a stroke of luck. And we're told both the priest and the Levite, they saw the man; their eyes connected with him; they saw his needs, but they chose to walk on by. We don't know why; they were probably too busy, too tired, or they had excuses. "Other people could care for this man." But Jesus says a Samaritan came on by, verse 33, and when the Samaritan saw him, it says he had compassion on him. And that compassion was shown in action. He went to him, he bandaged his wounds, he poured on oil, he put the man on his donkey, he brought him to the inn, and he took out some money to pay for his care. And Jesus says, "Go and do likewise. Go and show compassion towards other people, friends, and these are everywhere. We have people in financial crisis, the cost-of-living crisis. Some people are skipping a meal every day just to make ends meet."

Some people are so, so lonely; no one is reaching out to them. Some people are going through health scares and marriage struggles and spiritual crises. There are global news stories of young children across the globe being sex trafficked. We live in a crazy, crazy world. A few months ago, there was that Titanic submarine disaster, a tragedy where five people died, and that was awful. But on that very same day, a hundred refugees lost their lives in a boating tragedy, and we heard nothing about that. Every day, thousands of people across the globe are starving; there's flooding, there's disease, there's a lack of sanity, there's a lack of clean water. The sad reality is that I think we live in a compassionless world. Most people simply don't care. Most people, even in the church, just put themselves at the centre of everything or think that other people can care for their needs.

So, friends, being compassionate, it starts with seeing the needs, opening our eyes to the needs all around us, seeing people as Jesus saw them, as broken and burdened because people have not got it all together. Being compassionate means that you stop judging people, stop presuming that you know their situation. A man called Steven Cy was on a New York Subway when this man got on a train with three little kids, noisy, loud kids, and the man sat down and closed his eyes. The kids were wreaking havoc; they were so misbehaved. Finally, Cy confronted the man about his kids, and the man opened his eyes and said these words, "Oh, I guess you're right. I guess I should do something about my kids. It's just that we've just come from the hospital where their mother has just died about an hour ago, and I don't know what to think, and I guess I don't know how to handle this."

Because we never know people's story, please don't presume you do and judge other people by what you see. Remember Jesus looking over Jerusalem, and we're told, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, his heart was full of compassion, like a hen longing to gather her chicks."

There's a story of a newly appointed Minister standing in his study window, and he's weeping as he looks out over this city with people living in poverty and tragic conditions and of pain and suffering. A church warden says these words, "Don't worry, after a while, you'll get used to this." And the pastor says, "That's why I'm crying because I don't want my heart to be hardened to the needs of many. Let's not get used to it." I do wonder whether our hearts have been hardened to all the needs around us. Are we moved when we see people hurting and in pain? Please don't be overwhelmed. Here's my approach to compassion: one at a time, one at a time.

I love the story of the man who's walking along the beach one day, and there's been this massive storm, and all these starfish have been washed up onto the shore. This man sees this little boy, and he's picking up these starfish and he's flinging the starfish back into the ocean, one at a time. The man says, "Why are you bothering? You could never, ever get all these starfish back into the sea." The little boy says to the man, "I know that, but I've just made a difference to this one starfish I've just thrown back into the ocean. Don't underestimate the difference that you can make to one person when you choose to show compassion towards them."

As you've just heard, Rach and I have fostered a little boy called Enzo, and the fostering journey has been fascinating. We discovered an interesting stat from Foster in the UK: if one family from every church in the UK fostered one child, there would be no children in need of fostering across the whole of the UK. So, see the need, feel the need, don't be overwhelmed by all the needs, and remember you're not God. You are not God; let him ultimately show compassion. So, compassion is caring for the sufferers.

But as I close, it's more than that. It's

2. Mercy towards the Sinners

Because people are wandering through life without a saviour, and that should be gut-wrenching. Millions of people are like sheep without a Shepherd because they're ignoring Jesus, and they are directionless and in danger of eternal separation from Him.

See, here's what we're like. We are rebels; we violate God's commands; we disregard His love; we pursue false gods; we take, and we take, and we take, and we take. But God describes Himself as compassionate, and the word there is also merciful. He doesn't treat people as they deserve.

The Lord is compassionate. He doesn't excuse our sin, but He invites us to come to Him in our sin. He doesn't sweep over our sin; He deals with it in the person of Jesus Christ. That is His compassion. It's His mercy towards sinners. It's His pardon, it's us not getting what we deserve but being treated with kindness because of our Lord Jesus.

He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquity. That's His compassion. "For as high as the heavens are above the Earth, so great is His love towards those who fear Him. As far as the East is from the West, so far has He removed our transgressions from us."

That is His compassion. "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him." As a father has compassion – have you heard that phrase somewhere before? The father who has compassion?

Remember the other famous parable or story that Jesus told about the Prodigal Son, that young boy who was so demanding and basically said to his dad, "Dad, I wish you were dead. Give me your money, I don't want you." That wretched son went and squandered all his wealth on wild living and ignored his dad. One day he woke up and said, "I've been a fool. I'll go back to dad and say, 'Sorry, Dad, I'm sorry I've messed up.'" We're told in the Bible that his father was watching and waiting, and when he was still a long way off, the father had compassion on him – that's the word there. He went running towards his son, hugged him, forgave him, and said, "I love you." That is God's compassion towards you in the person of Jesus Christ. He runs towards you in His Son Jesus Christ, His arms are open towards you, and He's longing to embrace you and say, "Welcome home. I forgive you because my Son Jesus died for you." That is the compassion of God.

As we head towards Easter, please don't think that compassion is just feeling needs and seeing sufferings. Compassion is understanding the depth of God's love for you at that cross of Calvary where He pardoned your sin, where He showed mercy towards you as a sinner. And that mercy, that compassion, is available to all people. That's our prayer this Easter, that every man, woman, boy, and girl would experience and know and accept the compassion of our incredible, incredible God. So, the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate God who cares for the sufferer and has mercy towards the sinner.