

Compassion Camp: Be Love
First in a Series on Compassion
Zechariah 7:7-10
June 6, 2021
Pastor Jenothy Irvine

Prayer: God, you showed us what love is through the life of your son Jesus. By your Spirit, help us now to be love. Amen

Message

With the colder temps and rain, the weather last week tried to tell us otherwise but the calendar (and the cicadas) tells us that summer is here. School is out. The pool (although cold) is open. Backyard bar-b-ques are happening. Fireside gatherings are taking place. Folks have started traveling a bit more. And for the next six to eight weeks, kids will go from the excitement and relief of no school, more time to sleep in, and no schedules to follow, to boredom and unrest complaining there is nothing to do! Parents will go from feelings of “isn’t this great, no more drop off or pick up lines, no more last minute assignments or science projects due. Isn’t it nice we have time to go and do and be together” to “dear lord when do these kids go back to school.”

Summer also brings on the camping season. Every summer growing up I looked forward to our time on Pine Creek. It sat probably a mile or so off the main road that went through South Pass City, an old gold mining town. To get there we had to cross a rocky ravine, and drive through a beautiful wild-flower filled meadow that led to a perfect grove of aspen trees. There, we parked the family camper for the summer and spent every weekend tucked away from the world.

Nowadays when you hear camping season, it's not just pop up tents, smores, and pull behind campers. Nowadays there is a whole other world called summer camp. Summer camp has always been a thing, but not like now.

It is unbelievable the number of camps now available to kids and young people; sports camps are a given, church camps are expected, but the list of specialty camps is unreal. Just in one brief search this is what I found: art camp, drama camp, musical camp, specified instrument camp (oboe camp), marching band camp, adventure camp, nature camp, biology camp, ecology camp, archeology camp, photography camp, rodeo camp, horse wrangler camp, writing camp, language camp, family camp, rock climbing camp... you get the idea. You're interested in it, there is a camp for it.

When was the last time you went to camp? Well, pack up Grace Church, we are going to camp. The next three weeks we are going to Compassion Camp, an experience where we will grow and care together; exploring the theme of compassion. Compassion for others, ourselves, and the world. Now before you heave a sigh of, what is this about camp, that's kids stuff. Let me just say, you might be right. We hear the words summer camp and think kids. Compassion Camp is for all of us. This is an opportunity and a challenge to remember, refresh, and renew our understanding of compassion and the expectation God has of us to live a compassionate life.

Sounds easy enough, right? Think we already know what there is to know about compassion? Then why are so many people broken and oppressed? Why are mental health issues running rampant? Why is the burnout rate among health care professionals, social workers, pastors, and teachers hitting record highs?

Why does the suicide rate among young people, veterans, and law enforcement continue to increase. Why are hate crimes becoming almost normalized? How is it that women, children, people of color, and the marginalized are still the largest groups to experience injustice and violence? Why does it seem we have become calloused to the pain and suffering of others and accept it with comments like, “its just the way it is,” “they chose to live there,” “it’s always been that way”? It’s easy to point to the pandemic as the cause, and it has had an impact, but these things were happening pre-pandemic.

We may think we understand compassion and I am sure to the best of our knowledge and ability we do. AND I believe we can do better. I believe we must do better. God calls us to do and be better.

That was the message of the prophets. The Old Testament is full of the witness and testimony of prophet after prophet speaking the truth and wisdom of God to a people wandering in the wilderness of uncertainty, struggle, war, violence, political upheaval, division, and unrest. Sound like any situation or time in history you know of?

Prophets in the ancient world, were called to deliver messages from God, tradition marked them as preeminent bearers of the divine word. Hebrew prophets rarely, if ever, merely warned or gave advice; they spoke the divine word with authority. Some biblical authorities state that the phrase “the word of the God spoke / came to...” occurs some 2,000 times in the Old Testament alone. It was the way God revealed God’s self, rule, law, way, and expectations to God’s people. They weren’t magicians or fortune tellers. They were ones identified by God and

others to have a special connection, depth, and intercession with God and had authority to speak divine messages to the people of God.

You probably know or are familiar with the big guns of the Old Testament prophets. Those known as the major prophets - guys like: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Lesser known are some of the minor prophets - folks like: Obadiah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Zechariah, and Malachi. In fact, here is a challenge for you today. Before the sermon is over and without using the table of contents, tabs on the side of the pages, or your bible app, see if you can find the book of Zechariah, which we will be reading from in just a moment.

Zechariah was a prophet in Jerusalem around the time of 520 - 518 B.C. He lived and ministered during one of the lowest points in the experience of the Hebrew people throughout the whole biblical period. Some 66 years earlier, the city of Jerusalem had been defeated by the armies of Babylon and its temple had been destroyed, desecrated. Large numbers of Jerusalem's population were exiled to live in the labour camps, others escaped and settled in foreign countries. Only a few remained in the promised land; devoid of any leadership, they survived, but they had neither the vision nor the will to retain the vitality of faith which used to be celebrated. By the time Zechariah comes on the scene, the Persian Empire has taken control, defeating the Babylon armies. Cyrus, the Persian Emperor, made it possible for Jewish exiles to return. Of those who returned home, a few seemed to have set about the task of restoring the temple which had been destroyed. The problem was, there was no money to rebuild. The economy was bad, supplies were low, and a lot of believers thought it better to just let it crumble and forget about rebuilding (Craigie 133-34).

When the people had given up on rebuilding the place of worship they began to cling to the practices, rituals, and rules of the church. So much so that they began to hold the practices (fasting, prayer) in higher esteem than the One who gave them. They focussed so much on looking and sounding like a church - going through the motions to make themselves look and feel like church, that they lost sight of what made them church in the first place (Craigie 189-91).

Zechariah steps in and boldly reminds them as so many of the prophets did for generations before him. Read Text: Zech. 7:7-10

Unless I missed it, I didn't hear anything in there about rituals, traditional practices, or church rules and guidelines. Did you? Zechariah challenges the people of God just a few verses earlier by asking, "Do you do this (fasting) for yourselves or for God?" It isn't the rules and practices that make a people a church. It's the presence of God's love in the hearts of the people and how that love is made manifest through acts of compassion - compassion to see the suffering of others and take action as Jesus modeled later in the New Testament. It's the ability to empathize with the "other" and feel compelled to reduce their suffering as Jesus did. It is different from mercy. Mercy is a gift given or offered out of compassion - Compassion is a tangible expression of God's love to the suffering. It wasn't that what they were doing was wrong but they were doing it for the wrong reason.

One of the powerful things about Zechariah's message is that it did not remain in the Old Testament. It is quoted seventy one times in the New Testament (tabulation from the appendices to *The Greek New Testament*, ed. Kurt Aland et al, Third Edition (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1983). Primarily in the gospels as

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John speak of God's message through Jesus. What is that message? It is this: "Treat one another justly. Love your neighbors. Be compassionate with each other. Don't take advantage of widows, orphans, visitors, and the poor. Don't plot and scheme against one another."

Sounds a lot like the second of the greatest commandment; "love your neighbor as yourself." At the heart of compassion is love. Zechariah reminds us that we are not commanded to like or agree with what someone is doing, how they live, or the choices they make but we are commanded to be love in the midst of even our differences. We are not commanded to have all the answers before we "go and make disciples," or understand the complexities of every situation but we are commanded to be love wherever we are with all that we are with all that we have. Who are the widow / widowers among us? Are they included, remembered, and cared for? Who are the orphans (those without loving, safe, or healthy families - those with no place to call home)? Are they seen? Are they safe and provided for? Who are the strangers (visitors, outsiders, aliens in a strange land)? Are they welcome? Are they heard and accepted?

Do you know the mission of Grace Church? If you don't, we haven't done a very good job. Our mission and tagline on our logo is, Grace United Methodist Church - "Caring Together - Growing Together." Everything we do. Everything we are. Everything we offer, provide, host, present, or develop as the people of God here at Grace church needs to pass through the question of, "does this help the collective we care and grow together?" (and together means inside and outside our walls). Without a solid understanding of compassion, we can't do either. Without fully committing ourselves to being love, we do not and cannot have the compassion of God, who is love.

Be love church. Don't overthink it. Don't over complicate it. Don't conditionalize it. Don't demand it in return. Be it - be love and trust the Holy Spirit will take care of the transforming, healing, unifying, renewing, and rebuilding that follows. Be love. In the name of Love himself, Jesus. Amen

Resources

Daily Study Bible Series, Twelve Prophets Vol. 2

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New Interpreter's Bible Vol. VII