

15 March 2015

Acts of Compassion
Matthew 5:21-24; 6:2-4

So far in this sermon series on “means of grace” – the patterns and habits that place us in the position to grow in God’s loving presence – we’ve talked about worship and devotion. Worship is loving God in community with others. Check. This past week I attended five different worship services, three of them with Communion. I should be good. Devotion is loving God in solitude. Check. I kept up with my morning devotions this week, all seven days. Nailed it! But do you know when I was most aware of the presence of God this week? None of the above.

On Monday I got out to make some visits, one of which was at a care facility that specializes in memory care. I found the member I was looking for sitting at a table in a common room with a basket of colored pencils and a sheaf of coloring pages in front of her. I sat down and told her who I was and said I come to visit her. She smiled graciously, welcomed me, then went back to coloring. So I asked if I could do a page, too. For the next half an hour or so, we shared pencils, talked about flowers – both our coloring pages were pictures of flower baskets – listened to big band music (I didn’t know but one or two, but she hummed along with every song), and looked for a black pencil. Why is there never a good black? Can anyone tell me that? But anyway . . . *that* was where I found God this week: not in worship, not in solitude, but coloring pages with a friend, who might or might not have known me.

Some of you know exactly what I mean. Last week, I invited you to write down ways that you experience God in solitude. A sampling of your responses is on the bulletin insert, and the rest of them are posted on the Wesleyan Room window. They were fun to read. Many of you talked about finding God when alone in creation – at least four of you particularly mentioned hunting. Others spoke of music and morning or evening devotions. But some of you broke the rules. I *told* you it was supposed to be times when you’re alone, but some of you just had to bring in other people – holding grandchildren, singing with a choir, watching a gifted teacher with children – as if you could not talk about loving God without also loving others. You were right. Exactly. *That’s* why, when Jesus named the Great Commandment – love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength – he quickly added a second one: love your neighbor as yourself. You can’t the one without the other.

This is the background of today’s first scripture, Matthew 5:21-24. Jesus says: *‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.” But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool”, you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.* Did you get that? Do not come to worship God while nursing resentment against another person. First, go and be reconciled, if at all possible. Foster and restore love in the rest of your life, and then you will be able to love God. Repair broken relationships with others, or you cannot have a relationship with God. The law says, *Thou shall not kill*, but Jesus says, *Don’t even want to. Don’t even be angry. Do not curse another.* Our love for God is limited by the extent and quality of our love for others. If our love for others is weak and conditional, we cannot know deep and generous love with God. *He that loveth not, knoweth not God, for God is love* (1 John 4:8, KJV).

But when we do love others, God's love and grace surrounds us. When we look away from our own wants and needs to put another first, that's when we're most likely to stumble over God and be warmed and strengthened in grace. So how do we do that? What sorts of things do we do to practice loving others one-on-one as we love ourselves? Well, let me ask you. On the yellow slips in your bulletins, I invite you to write out something that you do to give of your time, your energy, your attention, your resources for someone else. Think beyond your immediate family. When have you served another in an act of compassion and discovered God in that experience?

[Pause, then collect the slips and ask if anyone would like to share aloud. Discuss.]

As you see, it doesn't have to be a difficult thing. It can be as simple as sitting beside someone in coffee hour who is alone or putting down your book on the airplane and listening to the involved story that the person beside you feels compelled to tell. Okay, that one's actually pretty difficult. But so long as we are giving of ourselves to others, we are drawing closer to God. But one quick warning. Last week, I stressed that when we pray and fast, we are supposed to do it privately, not calling attention to ourselves. Well, the same is true of acts of compassion. Don't do them for the sake of recognition. Again in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says this: *'So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you* (Matthew 6:2-4).

Here Jesus uses the example of financial gifts for the sake of others, but the principle applies to all gifts for others. Nothing that we do for a human audience brings us closer to God. Gifts must be for the sake of others, not our own sake. Now, as it happens, an illustration of this scripture fell in my lap couple of weeks ago, so I have to tell the story. As you may recall, in February we extended a special appeal to help supply our Personal Needs Closet – one of the ways that we as a church try to love others. As a church, you rose magnificently to the occasion and gave well over \$2,000 to help stock those shelves. I was so proud of your generosity, but that was just the start. The first week of March, a box was delivered to the church from an office supply company – a box maybe three feet cubed. No one in the office had ordered anything, nor was there any name on the box. All it said was, "Personal Needs Closet." It was full of toilet paper. One of you who didn't feel any need to get credit for the gift, just ordered it to us. Thank you. Wait, I'm not done. The next day an envelope came to the office. No return address. We opened it, and found inside a sheet of white paper. All it said was, "Personal Needs Closet." Inside the sheet were five \$100 bills. We don't know who did these things. That's all right. They didn't want us to know. They just wanted to help us love others.

So yes, we must love the Lord, Our God, with all we have. But we must also love others. And that second part is not optional. It may be second, but it is not secondary. Indeed, we can't do the first part unless we also do the second. But, as I said earlier, you already knew that. Last Sunday, after our discussion of loving God in solitude, Tim Harvey shook my hand after the service and said, "You know when you really experience the presence of God? When you forgive someone else." Exactly, Tim. Exactly. As Victor Hugo wrote, "To love another person is to see the face of God."