

Psalm 111  
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“Compassion”

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This summer we have heard a lot of stories telling of times when Jesus was tired, bone tired. So tired one story tells of him falling asleep in the boat during a violent storm which tossed and flooded the vessel. Yet, even crossing from one shore to the other to find rest, the crowds followed him and Jesus would arrive on the other side finding himself in a position to do ministry again, even at a point of exhaustion. Through these stories I found myself wondering how does Jesus muster the strength to keep on keepin’ on. Often, the stories tell us, it was because he had “Compassion” for the crowd.

Today’s psalm has good news for us when we find it hard to keep on, keepin on. Psalm 111 is about the power of compassion. This morning I want to share a couple stories about the ability of compassion to renew and transform us.

This past spring in Racine, Wisconsin, the book Wonder, became an example of the power of compassion. The tagline is "you can't blend in when you were born to stand out," and the story is having a profound effect on thousands of students.

Tyler Lynch, 6th grader said, referring to the sympathy and compassion he sees spreading among him and his classmates, “They should continue, because there’s a lot of positivity going around.”

Another 6th grader, Kaylee Gaines said, “It was really helpful to us to understand what (the Character) Auggie was going through, and what people at this school might be going through too.”

"Wonder" tells the story of Auggie Pullman, a fictional fifth-grader with a severely disfigured face. As he enters a new school, he must make new friends, avoid bullies and deal with his own insecurities. Kaylee adds, “He faced his fears and kept on going with his day.”

In December, SC Johnson provided more than 9,000 copies of the novel to Racine-area students in fourth through eighth grades. Those books were paired with a curriculum in the classrooms that fostered open and honest conversations.

Amy Winter, SC Johnson’s manager of global community affairs said, the story teaches “How to be nicer to classmates. How they want to be treated.” She adds, “Just because people may act or look different, it doesn’t make them any less special or important.”

Teachers and students alike said the impact of the program is noticeable. Christopher Thompson, Executive Director of curriculum and instruction for the Racine Unified School District says, we see “Changes in the students when it comes to how they communicate with one another and a greater sense of empathy on all students’ parts,”

In another article about Compassion, Deborah Calla writes about the significance compassion has for us day to day, “One of the first things I do every morning is read the news. I believe that is the same for most people. We want to know what is happening in the world and in our communities. We want to know how yesterday’s developments will be impacting our lives today. But as we read about all the wars, poverty and instability we feel overwhelmed and start to shut down. Unfortunately, the shutting down to the pain in the news carries on to our daily lives, and we start to become disconnected from our ability to feel compassion and to empathize. But the news is not the only reason. In addition, our own life’s difficulties and struggles take care of whatever compassion we have left in our hearts.”

Then she adds, “The human experience is based on exchange and connectedness. How many times do we have a good experience and wonder how much better it would have been if shared with a loved one? How much better do we feel about ourselves if we know we have friends and family watching our backs?

Having compassion, which she calls, ‘the ability to understand the emotional state of another person and then want to alleviate their suffering,’ makes us feel connected and part of a group. It gives us purpose and it grounds us. Without compassion we are bound to feel alone.”

Every day we have an opportunity to change someone’s life by paying attention to their needs. Every day someone else has the opportunity to change our lives in the same manner. It can be a simple act or gesture which carries the power to connect and transform.

The gospels repeatedly reveal the power of compassion in Jesus’ life. In parable after parable we hear Jesus tell of someone extending their heart, or hand, to another person in need, and often it was someone society did not consider worth the time or effort of one’s compassion.

One more story of compassion is a classic Zen story. It is told in many different versions, this one comes from a book for young readers by Jon J. Muth, called Zen Shorts.

“Two traveling monks reached a town where there was a young woman waiting to step out of her car. The rains had made deep puddles and she could not step across without spoiling her silken robes. She stood there, looking very cross and impatient. She was scolding her attendants. They had nowhere to place the packages they held for her, so they couldn’t help her across the puddle.

The younger monk noticed the woman, said nothing, and walked by. The older monk quickly picked her up and put her on his back, transported her across the water, and put her down on the other side. She did not thank the older monk, she just shoved him out of the way and departed.

As they continued on their way, the young monk was brooding and preoccupied. After several hours, unable to hold his silence, he spoke out. “That woman back there was very

selfish and rude, but you picked her up on your back and carried her! Then she didn't even thank you!

"I set the woman down hours ago," the older monk replied. "Why are you still carrying her?"

That is the place of compassion, one of the truly wonderful gifts Jesus demonstrated through his life. As, God with us, Jesus lived genuinely, honestly and by grace.

Rumi, a 13th century Muslim poet and Sufi mystic once wrote this about compassion, "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing, and right doing, there is a field. I will meet you there."

Amen