

"The Difference Makers: Compassion and Justice"
Micah 6:6-8

This is our fourth and final week of focusing on being difference makers. Today, I would like us to consider how our compassion can make a difference in the world. We can talk about working for justice and peace in the world all we want, but unless we feel compassion for others, it is hard to stay motivated about making a difference in the world. Political divisions, our busyness, and the magnitude of our world problems make it seem impossible to make a difference in the world. Our culture is even more challenged today because we tend to live more and more in private spaces that separate us from others. Think of a few examples from our own life. Twenty or thirty years ago, when the doorbell rang unexpectedly, one expected someone to stop by and visit. Today, the doorbell is only rung by UPS or the mail person. 20 years ago, people sat down to eat without having their phones right there with them. In order to get directions, you actually had to stop your car and talk to someone. The public library was an important part of your life. What other examples can you think of?

In his book, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, Parker Palmer talks about the importance of shared common public spaces where we get to mingle with strangers and get to meet those who are different from us instead of living and encountering people who think and act like us. He wrote that, "we are increasingly private and therefore deprived people, deprived of meaningful opportunities to develop democratic habits of the heart... We must reclaim our public life before we sink any further into privatism at the expense of democracy and the of the privacy we cherish, a privacy that requires public vigilance if it is to be preserved." 30 years ago Howard Snyder predicted that our focus on the private life will lead to the destruction of our communities. He proposed the following strategies for destroying community: "Fragment family life, move people away from the neighborhoods where they grew up, set people farther apart by building larger houses and yards, and separate the places people work from where they live... partition off people's lives into as many (separate) worlds as possible. To facilitate this process, encourage everyone to have their own car. Replace meaningful communication with television, cut down on family size and instead, fill people's homes with possessions. The result? A post-familial, disconnected culture where self is king, relationships are thin, and individuals fend for themselves."

So today as we hear the words of the prophet Micah about what God requires of us of seeking justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God, I invite us to consider how we might increase our connection and compassion. If we get in touch with the compassion which God put deep in our hearts and souls, great things are possible, and we can defy and transform the norms of our culture that focus so much on the individual and neglect the importance of community.

I have a couple of clips for us to watch. In each, there is a lesson about compassion. The first one is from the movie "The Blind Side" which is based on the true story of Leigh Anne Tuohy and Sean Tuohy who take in a homeless teenage African-

American, Michael Oher. Michael has no idea who his father is, and his mother is a drug addict. Michael has had little formal education and few skills to help him learn. Leigh Anne soon takes charge however, as is her nature, ensuring that the young man has every opportunity to succeed. When he expresses an interest in football, she goes all out to help him, including giving the coach a few ideas on how best to use Michael's skills. They not only provide him with a loving home, but they also hire a tutor to help him improve his grades to the point where he would qualify for an NCAA Division I athletic scholarship. Michael Oher was the first-round pick of the Baltimore Ravens in the 2009 NFL draft. And all of this started with a moment of deep compassion.

The Blind Side scene in the rain

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPjYhPGkhGA>

The second video clip is from an exercise to help people have compassion and understanding when it comes to our hidden privileges and why some people struggle.

Understanding privilege

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4K5fbQ1-zps>

This is what the prophet Micah was trying to help his people understand and get in touch with. The people of Israel had been faithful in their worship, but their economic and social systems had become corrupt serving only the interests and greed of the wealthy and powerful. They had replaced following God's commands for the social systems of their lives with an exclusive focus on temple worship and sacrifices. Instead of doing justice, practicing jubilee, and loving their neighbors, they focused on offering burnt sacrifices to God in the temple. So, the scene is set in this chapter in a courtroom with God bringing a case against the people of Israel and the judge is actually nature. The mountains and the hills are the witnesses and judge to God's case against Israel. God reminds the people of Israel of God's amazing care for the people throughout the ages. So what God was saying is that, "I have kept my end of the bargain. I have done what I have promised. But you have not done the same!" The accusation is that the people of Israel did not practice justice in their communities. They had reduced their relationship with God to rituals and empty worship. And now they are being summoned to plead their case in court. The issue at hand is their faithfulness to their relationship with God. Leaders accepted bribes; merchants cheated their customers, exploitation was on the rise and the practices of jubilee and release of debts were abandoned. How does this kind of thing happen to good people? How do good people who love God get so misguided? I think it is simple. When we get separated from the suffering of others, it is easy to just focus on ourselves and get consumed by our own needs and wants. The illusion of being separate from others and from God can grow by being disconnected from others. The prophet Micah offers a really great prescription: Act, love, and walk. So this week, I invite you to pay attention in your own life to where God might be calling you to have compassion. This does not have to be a big thing. It might be a moment of prayer for someone who is struggling with their health. It might be talking to a stranger at a store. It might be going to your public library and getting to meet one person who is different from you. One example that I saw recently of this work for justice in our

community has been that of Tami Underhill Fuest. She started a local chapter of a Facebook community called “Buy Nothing Batavia.” Tami has a passion for helping people in our local community deal with the problem of consumerism which causes a lot of pain in our world today. She has decided to use her voice and her energy to create this forum where people post pictures of items that they have and no longer need to share with those who may need them for free. Also, people who need https://www.facebook.com/groups/1877498925907524/?hc_ref=ARQt7-XpStfzXZQA6XbQEO8oa1FSml3JtgfNYxLGyrzbc7bZ9PTCWYAcVbKBUSm_R8

The idea behind this project is so simple. It is a powerful way to not only combat consumerism and waste, but is also a way to build community and to connect with people we don't know. There are 660 members of this group right here in Batavia and this project started only a few months ago.

One spiritual practice that has helped Christians throughout history is to be connected to their communities and the events around them and to respond with prayer and action. Here is how we can do it today. Each day, whenever you read or view the news, do that with the intention of prayer and compassion. Start with saying a prayer. Then, experience the news in whatever format you choose. After that, take a few deep breaths and allow yourself to feel God's compassion for whatever news you experienced (people, places, situations, etc.). Next, take a few moments to pray for the people or places involved in the stories that especially touched your heart (see instructions below).

Let's conclude with listening to a song by the Eagles which is a call to action. Amen. “There's a Hole in the World”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9itzdS5YeY>

PRAYING THE NEWS

1. **Pray** before Experiencing the News: Loving God, I check the news every day, and every day I am shocked and saddened, but also inspired and encouraged. As I take in the news today, inspire me to pray for those involved in the stories, those affected by the events, and all who announce and receive the news. Give me the gift of awareness and a sense of responsibility, especially toward the most vulnerable in our society and in our world. Expand my heart, and give me a share of your love, that I may embrace all that is news today and see where you are calling me to action. Amen.
2. **Experience** the News in whatever format you choose.
3. **Pause:** Take a few deep breaths and allow yourself to feel God's compassion for whatever news you experienced (people, places, situations, etc.).
4. **Pray:** Take a few moments to pray for the people or places involved in the stories that especially touched your heart.