

“Dare to Care: Awareness of the Other”  
Mark 1:40-45

As we begin the new sermons sermon series about compassion and care, I would like to share with you a recent place where I saw compassion. This was a couple of weeks ago during the Grammy awards when Lady Gaga received her award and gave her acceptance speech. It was a powerful moment. Let's watch:

<https://youtu.be/ytFPZdhvaMQ>

(second service: She gave thanks to God first and then said this: I'm so proud to be a part of a movie that addresses mental health issues. They're so important. And a lot of artists deal with that, and we've got to take care of each other. So if you see somebody that's hurting, don't look away. And if you're hurting, even though it might be hard, try to find that bravery within yourself to dive deep and go tell somebody and take them up in your head with you.")

It was a powerful moment as she had such a broad audience and could touch many lives. It was a call for compassion by raising awareness about the struggles and suffering of many people in our world. In addition to suffering internally, people with mental illness have had to worry about the social stigma of their illness. They suffer in silence because of the belief that mental illness is tied to moral or character deficiency. In our modern world, no one would think that someone who has thyroid problems is morally responsible for their illness, while many still believe that mental health issues or addiction are related to moral or behavioral choices. I am so grateful for the many people in our world who are working hard to alleviate the suffering of those with mental illness and to allow an open space in our society where we can be supportive of each other without being fearful of judgment. That is the power of daring to care by becoming aware of the suffering and struggles of others.

Today's Bible story is about Jesus showing us a great example of awareness about the plight of people ostracized by society due to illness. It is about a nameless man, a man who is only known to us as a leper, a label. He is a man seen by his own society an outsider and as someone to be despised and ignored. During that time in history and according to the laws of purification found in the book of Leviticus chapters 13 and 14 and later in the Jewish Mishnah, we find teachings and conversations about how to deal with skin diseases. Priests/rabbis were designated to inspect such illnesses in order to deal with contagious diseases. If the priest decided that someone's skin disease was contagious, then they would have been isolated from society. Re-entry was possible but needed to be done properly. The rabbis/priests were basically practicing community health care. The problem comes when people with contagious diseases become nameless, are treated as outsiders, are despised and are stripped of their rights and their significance as human beings. Society left them out of any social circles of support. We can simply say today, "Oh well, they just didn't know any better." But this pattern of human behavior that is based on fear gets repeated in human history over and over again. People get victimized by the fears or indifference of the majority. Whether it is mental illness,

aging, cultural or religious identity, or other human barriers we create, people suffer, and the only cure is reconnecting with our innate God-giving capacity to care.

Let's see how Jesus did that (read Mark 1:40-45). It is interesting to see Jesus' reaction to this. In verse 41 the original text shows a textual variant for what we normally read as "moved with pity," which is *orgistheis* "being angry." But even if the word "pity" is selected, it is not a simple word of pity. The literal meaning in (screen) Greek of *splagchnizomai* "pity" is "having one's intestines turn." So, Jesus has these intense feelings in response to the condition of this nameless man with leprosy and how he was objectified and oppressed by the priests and rabbis. Jesus touched the leper which would have endangered him in many ways (exposure to illness and loss of status and religious purity)! As a result, the man was healed. But Jesus did not stop there. He sent him back as a testimony to the priest and in turn to the whole community.

Jesus saw the injustice of the situation and saw an opportunity for healing not only the man but also the social system that oppressed lepers and excluded them. This is in line with the fact that in Capernaum Jesus had surprised those worshipping and studying in the synagogue by teaching with a new kind of authority (Mark 1:22). He was not part of the oppressive powers of society. He was teaching to heal and to uproot the powers that oppressed people. His time in Capernaum, just a few verses before this story, was a strong effort for social reform. Jesus was of course acting in the long tradition of prophets before him who dared challenge and heal their societies. This story of healing has a parallel in the Hebrew Scripture with Elisha healing Naaman the Syrian commander 2 Kings 5:1-14.

As we journey with Jesus through this season of Lent, I invite you to consider what helps you become aware of the suffering of others around you. Sometimes we think of the big issues and struggles of the day and forget to pay attention to the people who are struggling around us at work, at church, in our families, and in our daily interactions. Pay attention, stay awake! Become curious about the stories of others! As Joseph Nassal says, (screen) "behind every scar there is a story." Do you know the stories behind the scars of the people in your life? Do you listen to them without judgment and with openness?

Today we have one of our deacons who will share his experience of what helped him get in touch with his compassion for those who are often ignored by society due to aging, illness, or disability. (Neil to share about the Nursing Home Ministry and why he is involved in it. How is Christ's compassion related to this ministry?)

For our prayer time, I would like to invite you to consider with me what helps you become aware of the suffering of others. We are using the image of the Tree of Compassion from Joyce Rupp's book *Boundless Compassion*. She notes that the seeds of the Tree of Compassion are (screen): nonjudgment, nonviolence, forgiveness and mindfulness. What awareness do you think helps you grow these seeds into a full "Tree of Compassion" with its roots (foundation for compassion), trunk (conduits of compassion), branches (reaching out with compassion), leaves (receptacles of compassion), and fruit (offering

compassion)? (Screen: Tree of Compassion Awareness: 1. Roots: Foundation, 2. Trunk: Conduit, 3. Branches: Reaching Out, 4. Leaves: receptacles, 5. Fruit: Offering). Turn to two or three of your neighbors and share with them your answers. You can pick just one part of the tree to grow. (Ask for two volunteers one to write the responses and one to put them on the tree). Amen.