A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*“The Shape of Gospel Living”*

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

July 1, 2018

The gospel is so strange. It’s just so odd in what it says life is supposed to be about and how it’s supposed to be lived, and who people of the gospel are supposed to be thinking about and having compassion. It’s not natural, I tell you that. This morning’s readings are about interruptions: to our comfort, to our ascendency, to our wallets, and to our rigidities . . .to all the ways our ego operates. Through these passages we begin to catch a glimpse of the kind of lives of grace and compassion that Christians live. We might just discover it as a breath of fresh air, but no doubt it’s bizarre compared to the way the world works.

The kind of lives Christians live, apparently, are lives in which other people have a claim on you. Giving something to those people, those other people, is not a strategy for good karma, or because you’re nice, or even because God commands it and we must obey, but comes from another principle—that as Christians you’re not alone. Our lives are blessed by others and are to be blessings to others. Compassion, care, healing, protection, even rescue are the kinds of words that come to mind when we think about these things.

In our reading in 2 Corinthians, we find ourselves dropped into the middle of a campaign to raise money. Paul is writing the Corinthians asking them to fulfill the promises they’d made a year earlier to give generously to the collection Paul is taking up for “the relief of the saints.” The saints he refers to in verse 4 are Christians in Jerusalem. They need relief. Their own generosity to the poor in Jerusalem is well-documented in the book of Acts. Now, about 25 years later, they are the ones in need as a drought has hit and they are suffering. So Paul is tapping his network of Christians from Galatia to Macedonia to Corinth to raise some money to take back to them.

Of all of those, the Corinthians are the most well-to-do. A port city, Corinth was a center of trade and commerce. Let’s not confuse these people with the rich and famous, but they had a little more than most. They certainly had more than most of the people up north in Macedonia. Here’s where Paul really lays it on ‘em. “Oh, my friends in Corinth, you should see what those people in Macedonia gave to the collection for the saints. They begged us for the privilege of giving money to this cause. Isn’t that wonderful. Now, I know you’re rich in everything. Be rich in this offering too. Let’s see what you can do.”

It’s a mighty fine fund-raising tactic. “Oh, you fine people of Waco, you should see what the ennobled people of College Station gave. Think you can do better?” But there’s more here than just a rhetorical ploy, just a wink and a nod to lighten wallets, you know like fundraisers who know you’re all in on the joke. “Who here believes in the hereafter? Well, that’s great, because we’re here after your money.” (ta-da). Or, “We have all the money we need. It’s just still in your wallets.” Ba-dum. Or the latest one I heard. “Give it now because they don’t pull u-hauls behind hearses.” Cha-ching!

But this is more. This is more than lightening the mood to lighten the wallets. Paul leans into a different sort of argument, a more serious, more hopeful one and it’s more than about money. He makes his case on this principle: you belong to them and they belong to you. You may not know them; you may never set eyes on them. You may be different from them in all kinds of ways, but they belong to you and you belong to them. Your abundance in whatever shape the abundance takes is to supply their need just as their abundance is to supply your need. We are bound to one another.

Paul invokes a principle of fairness. It’s a matter of fairness, he says. One person’s abundance is to supply another person’s need, so that the other person’s abundance will supply the first person’s need. A person who has much doesn’t have too much; a person who has little doesn’t have too little. That’s the fairness the Apostle teaches Christians. A circle of mutuality exists. We belong to one another.

Now this is a remarkable thing if you think about it for a minute. It is an inconvenient way of life. It’s messier than straight-up individualism; it’s riskier than tribalism; it’s not survival of the fittest. Quite the opposite; it ensures the survival of the weakest. The Apostle is not just fund raising. He’s setting out a Jesus-shaped vision of what Christian life is about. It’s a vision that is woven through both letters to the Corinthians, from the first page of the first letter. “Consider your calling brothers and sisters. Not many of you were wise by worldly standards, not many were powerful, and not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not to bring to nothing things that are.”

This is the shape of gospel living in those times and in ours. It’s possible that this character of the gospel that shaped the church in the 1st century leads to its neglect in the 21st century. Think about it. Consider what cultural forces stare down a gospel message that emphasizes sharing, mutuality, fairness, and humbleness and prioritizes the weak, the insignificant, the poor, the suffering, the stranger, the sojourner, the child without her parents, the one who is alone in a strange land. The disconnect between such a gospel and the world out there is so strange to be almost comical if it weren’t tragic.

A few years ago Eugene Peterson astutely observed the predicament a gospel of compassion faces in these days, noting: “the voices that command the largest audiences in our American culture are spokesmen for the ego, sometimes the religious ego, but nevertheless the ego. Deep-rooted, me-first distortions of our humanity have been institutionalized in our economics [and our public policies] and sanctioned by our psychologies. And now we have gotten ourselves a religion in the same style, a religion that will augment our human potential and a gospel that will make us feel good. We want prayers that bring us daily benefits in the form of a higher standard of living, with occasional miracles to relieve our boredom. We come to the Bible as consumers, rummaging through the texts to find something at a bargain. We come to worship as gourmets of the emotional, thinking that the numinous might provide a nice addition to sunsets and symphonies.” (*As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, 68)

Even in his scathing indictment of our cultural condition from a couple decades ago, Peterson’s edges are rounded too smoothly for today’s cultural moment. We no longer just want prayers to bring us daily benefits; we actively arrange things to be sure others are denied the same benefits. We no longer come to the Bible as consumers in a therapeutic, feel-good quest; we come to the Bible as if we’re at a firearms dealer, shopping for weapons to defend our cause no matter how bizarrely we have to bend the text. The end result is we no longer just come to worship as gourmets of the emotional; we come to worship with hugely deep emotional scars.

Hurting, angry people who don’t know what to do with their hurt or anger but hurt and anger someone else, flying the flag of truth and justice without seemingly remembering what either of those words mean. And the cycle spins over and over and over again. It’s a tough season for a gospel of compassion in this era of the exalted ego.

This gospel of compassion, mutuality, belonging to one another, the gospel of Jesus, was just as countercultural then as now. Mark’s gospel in chapters 4-5 tell stories of three unlikely people to whom Jesus shows uncommon mercy. This is still the gospel way. A man living among the tombs on the other side of the sea is the first of them. Possessed by unclean spirits, shunned by his own people, dwelling among the tombs--a man barely living among the dead. Jesus went to him when everyone else had given up. To get to the man, Jesus crossed the sea, at night, in a small boat in a storm the disciples all thought would kill them. The gospel is risky. The way Mark tells the story the only reason they went through the storm was just to find and save this one man.

The second story is of Jairus’ 12-year-old daughter. When Jesus had come back across the sea from the Gerasenes, stepping off the boat he is met on this side of the sea by a ruler of the synagogue, pretty much the antithesis of the Gerasene demoniac. Jairus: powerful, respected by his followers, a leader living among his people, but possessed by grief—the kind of grief only a parent can know who is losing their child. Like the Gerasene demoniac who breaks the shackles and chains that bound him, Jairus breaks the shackles of his religious position and his pride to fall on the ground at Jesus feet and beg him to come home with him, “My daughter is at the point of death. Come lay your hands on her so that she may be made well and live.” Jesus went with him even when everyone else gave up on the girl for dead. The gospel is the power of life when all else is death.

The third story is of a woman following Jesus along the road to Jairus’ house. The crowds are teeming, pressing in on Jesus, but no one would dare touch this woman. She’s unclean, hemorrhaging for twelve years. Twelve long years. She’s been like this since Jairus’ little girl was born and that sick little girl is not so little anymore. “If I could just touch the hem of his garment I will be made well.” Where did she get that idea? What she had been taught was, “If I touch the hem of his garment, he will be made unclean.” But she knew something more. She saw something in him. She saw in him hope, for the first time. She saw in Jesus what Jairus saw for his daughter, what the demon-possessed man saw for another chance at life. She saw what Paul saw in the Corinthians. Hope for the hopeless. New life for the living dead, healing for the sick, dignity for the suffering. She reached out and touched him when everyone had told her she should give up on herself.

The Gerasene, Jairus, the woman, the Jewish Christians: all out of options. All resources gone. All options exhausted. All support systems crumbled. Children of God whose need has claim on Christian abundance.

We’re talking about people, today, fellow human beings, children of God, who have nothing. In each story we’ve looked at, Jesus and his people see their lives belong to those people. It appears the gospel is a way of compassion for people suffering, parents begging for help for their children, people for whom the system has broken down, pushed away, demeaned and denied. For them, the gospel is life incarnated by Jesus in the lives of Christians who show uncommon compassion when the world around them turns their backs.

The gospel of Christ is the gospel of the cross, foolishness to the wise and weakness to the strong, but it is this faith that can heal the whole world of the sickness of our time.

Sons and daughters of God, your faith has made you well; now go in peace, and be healed of your disease. For the kingdom of God is such as this: we belong to one another, and our brothers and sisters out there need us and we need them. Together we come open-handed to the Table of our Lord where all are fed the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

Copyright by Eric Howell, 2018