

**SERMON TITLE:** “Compassion: A Gut Reaction”

**SCRIPTURE TEXT:** Matthew 9:35-38

*When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them.* The Greek word translated as *compassion* in this text is the strongest word for *pity* in the Greek language. It’s formed from another Greek word that literally means *the bowels*—or what we might call *the gut*. It describes a compassion which comes from the depths of one’s being. To feel this kind of compassion is to know the suffering of another—*in the gut*.

Compassion like this motivated Jesus to move about among all the cities and villages. It motivated him to teach and preach and heal. And I dare say it’s the kind of response to suffering that Jesus would want from the laborers God sends into his harvest.

Now I know compassion like this. I felt it as I watched my wife Laura Jean endure the pain of childbirth—twice. I felt it when our oldest son, Brian, was lying on a gurney in the emergency room of a Houston hospital suffering from hypoglycemic seizures. I felt it on that night several months ago when we received a call at 3 o’clock in the morning that our youngest son James had been in a car wreck and was in the hospital.

Now these are people that I love so compassion experienced in the gut comes easily for me. But to be honest with you, compassion for others more removed from my affections, doesn’t come so easily. In fact, when I consider the suffering of people whose condition in life makes me uncomfortable—like a homeless drunk on the street, for example—I often feel nothing in the gut—except perhaps contempt or revulsion. And God forgive me, there’s a part of me that likes it this way because without compassion, I’m not motivated to respond to the suffering. I just ignore it and go on about my business.

Do you know what I mean? How do we let our hearts can get so hard? We put on blinders so as not to see and build emotional barriers so as not to feel—and the result is that we do so very little to alleviate the misery of people around us—and we're the followers of Jesus.

And this has devastating consequences. Peter Storey is the former bishop of the Methodist Church in the Johannesburg/Soweto area of South Africa. He served during the brutal days of racial oppression in that country known as apartheid. In a recent address that I was privileged to hear, the bishop told us a story: *We whites in South Africa grew up good people. We were not rich, but we lived comfortably....Like you, we loved our sports....We followed the Stock Exchange, argued heatedly over politics, and took pride in our Parliamentary democracy. We watched the TV shows you do. We had most everything we needed.... We were proud of our innovative technology and our health system was as good as the best. Except for oil, our land was rich in mineral wealth. White South Africa was the economic and industrial giant of Africa and we were quick to link this with the belief that we were a superior kind of people. We looked on that other, darker population among us with disdain.*

*Hubris aside, we were an encouragingly Christian people, with as high a church attendance average as anywhere in the world....We had a local copyright on God; we believed that God had blessed South Africa and our orange, white and blue flag in a special way. Truth be told, God was a White South African.*

*But the only problem was that we never lived in the real world. We lived in a bubble. What we were determined not to see was how our life-style was being lived at great cost to millions of other people. Our economy floated on an ocean of cheap labor and depended on the poverty and deprivation of black South Africans, whose sweat we needed in order to keep our system going. They lacked many of the most basic resources for living while we siphoned*

*everything off to feed our needs and increase our comfort....We needed them, but we didn't "know" them. We didn't want them, so we used them—and then made them invisible. After work hours, if they were not needed to clean our homes and cook our meals, they were sent to their dingy black townships to live amongst their own kind...out of sight and out of mind.*

Bishop Storey then went to meddling. He began to speak of *the American Bubble* that floats on a sea of poverty and want, called the “developing world.”<sup>1</sup> And I think he’s got a point.

Can you imagine what would happen if every nation on the face of the earth lived at the same level of affluence that we enjoy here in America? It would be a catastrophe of biblical proportions because the drain on the world’s resources would simply be unsustainable which means that our current prosperity is in no small measure contingent upon others living with less—even a lot less—and this creates suffering. So it pays for us not to feel because if we allowed ourselves to have a gut reaction to the suffering of others—things might change.

Peter Storey concludes that *Breaking out of the American bubble is the utmost priority. It doesn't happen by writing checks, nor by knowing all the statistics about that other world outside. It happens, not by knowing more but by “feeling” more.*<sup>2</sup>

For example, in 1958, a 35 year old English woman named Anita Goulden went on holiday to Peru to visit her brother. She was about to go home by way of the United States when she saw an unbelievable sight—children with tuberculosis and meningitis lying neglected and abandoned in the street in pools of their own blood. The people walking by did nothing.

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<sup>1</sup> Storey, Rev. Professor Peter. "Making a World of Difference." Large Church Initiative of The United Methodist Church. Large Church Initiative. Universal Studios Resort, Orlando. 20 Jan. 2008.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

But Anita felt something. She felt something called compassion. And her gut reaction to the suffering of those children changed her life and the lives of others. Do you know what she did? She stayed to help. For the next 44 years she stayed. She became a laborer in the harvest of the Lord.

She started traveling by donkey to the nearby villages surrounding Piura, Peru to find more unwanted children. Her first stop in these towns was always the pigsty, the common place for leaving physically and mentally handicapped babies with the excuse that they were of no use to their families and a curse from God.

Anita's work provided permanent care for the most sorely afflicted in Peru and has established an excellent education for 250 of the poorest children from the shanties—and all of this because Anita allowed herself to feel—to have a gut reaction to the suffering around her.<sup>3</sup>

Which brings us back to Jesus: *When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them.* What about us?

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<sup>3</sup> ("A Vacation of Compassion." SermonCentral. 3 Jan. 2002. The Anita Goulden Trust Newsletter. 14 June 2008 <<http://www.sermoncentral.com>>.)