

Means of Grace: Compassion

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – September 8 2024

16th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Deuteronomy 15:7-11; 2 Corinthians 9:6-10; Mark 8:1-8

Reflection: Psalm 25

Greeting: The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made. The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever. (Psalm 145)

Prayer: Lord, we seek your grace as we join together in worship. Grant us wisdom that we may better follow your ways and help each other to do your will. Grant us understanding so that we may better love you and better love our neighbor as ourselves. May you help us to better reflect the compassion that you have shown us in all that we are and all that we do. By your Holy Spirit, guide us that we may continually serve each other in your name. Heavenly father, grant us peace of mind and assurance in our hearts. And let us celebrate the life, death, and resurrection found in your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Help us to see all that is good when we put our trust in your steadfast love and faithfulness. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 25

*Make your ways known to me, Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth—teach it to me— because you are the God who saves me. I put my hope in you all day long. Lord, remember your compassion and faithful love— they are forever! But don't remember the sins of my youth or my wrongdoing. Remember me only according to your faithful love for the sake of your goodness, Lord. The Lord is good and does the right thing; he teaches sinners which way they should go. God guides the weak to justice, teaching them his way. All the Lord's paths are loving and faithful for those who keep his covenant and laws. Please, for the sake of your good name, Lord, forgive my sins, which are many!
(Psalm 25:4-11 CEB+)*

We read the words of Psalm 25, and we hear of the example of compassion the Lord gives. That we should follow the example of faithful love that we have been shown. Do you celebrate that God is there for you to forgive you for your sins? Do you turn to God to help you to forgive others? How do you share the compassion you've been shown? Who can you lift up in prayer this week? Who can you join in prayer to strengthen in God's grace? How will you seek God's peace and love in your life this week? How will you share that love and peace with those around you? How does God's grace change the way that you live your life in Christ?

Prayer: God, we thank you for always listening when we pray. We thank you for your steadfast love and faithfulness that are ever before us. Help us to remember your example of love and compassion in all that we do to be closer to you, Lord. We come to you now with the causes that we have to rejoice. We lift up our prayers of thanksgiving together as a congregation. We also lift up the worries that weigh on our hearts. We turn to you with the joys and concerns that we have lifted up with one voice. We also turn to you with the silent struggles and celebrations that we hold in our hearts. Though they go unspoken, we know that you hear our prayers, Lord. We ask now that you be with us in our laughter and our tears, in our dancing and our mourning. Be with us so that we may know your presence and your peace. Help us to celebrate that by faith you are with us always, in this life to the next, and forevermore. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the Common English Bible. Our first reading is from Deuteronomy chapter 15, verse 7 through 11.

Now if there are some poor persons among you, say one of your fellow Israelites in one of your cities in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, don't be hard-hearted or tightfisted toward your poor fellow Israelites. To the contrary! Open your hand wide to them. You must generously lend them whatever they need. But watch yourself! Make sure no wicked thought crosses your mind, such as, The seventh year is coming—the year of debt cancellation—so that you resent your poor fellow Israelites and don't give them anything. If you do that, they will cry out to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin. No, give generously to needy persons. Don't resent giving to them because it is this very thing that will lead to the Lord your God's blessing you in all you do and work at. Poor persons will never disappear from the earth. That's why I'm giving you this command: you must open your hand generously to your fellow Israelites, to the needy among you, and to the poor who live with you in your land. (Deuteronomy 15:7-11 CEB+)

Our next reading is from 2 Corinthians chapter 9, verse 6 through 10.

What I mean is this: the one who sows a small number of seeds will also reap a small crop, and the one who sows a generous amount of seeds will also reap a generous crop. Everyone should give whatever they have decided in their heart. They shouldn't give with hesitation or because of pressure. God loves a cheerful giver. God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace. That way, you will have everything you need always and in everything to provide more than enough for every kind of good work. As it is written, He scattered everywhere; he gave to the needy; his righteousness remains forever. The one who supplies seed for planting and bread for eating will supply and multiply your seed and will increase your crop, which is righteousness. (2 Corinthians 9:6-10 CEB+)

Our final reading is from Mark chapter 8, verse 1 through 8.

In those days there was another large crowd with nothing to eat. Jesus called his disciples and told them, "I feel sorry for the crowd because they have been with me for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they won't have enough strength to travel, for some have come a long distance." His disciples responded, "How can anyone get enough food in this wilderness to satisfy these people?" Jesus asked, "How much bread do you have?" They said, "Seven loaves." He told the crowd to sit on the ground. He took the seven loaves, gave thanks, broke them apart, and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they gave the bread to the crowd. They also had a few fish. He said a blessing over them, then gave them to the disciples to hand out also. They ate until they were full. They collected seven baskets full of leftovers. (Mark 8:1-8 CEB+)

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

In our Means of Grace series, we take a pivot this week. For the last two weeks, we have looked at works of piety, our devotion and our worship. These actions help to influence our works of mercy, giving us the focus on God that helps us as we go to help others. Just like in our works of piety, our works of mercy have individual and community focus in them. This week we take a look what we do with individual acts of compassion. Next week we will look at our acts as a community with justice. To give a brief description of the differences, our acts of compassion are person to person help while our acts of justice have us come together as a community to enact system wide change. So, we turn our attention to our individual acts. Our compassion is what causes us to go to help our neighbor with the things that we do as an individual to help those who are in need. We can help those in need in many different ways because there are many different needs. But everything that we do to respond to God's grace by helping others is an act of compassion and belongs in our works of mercy as part of the means of grace.

Our first reading today helps us to think about how we treat the poor, those who are in need with whatever their need may be. The command that we are given in the law of Deuteronomy is that we should not withhold things from the poor, that we shouldn't be hard-hearted or tight-fisted, and that we should give generously. But not only that, we should give generously without resenting the poor. We might think that is something easy to do, but it turns out we can quickly resent those who are in need. Because it is all too easy to see someone get help and then think that it isn't fair. We can think that they got something for free that someone else had to work for. Because we can lose focus of God's grace. Instead of being resentful, we should rejoice that we have been blessed with enough to share. That we can celebrate that God has enabled us to give to those who are in need. We should also remember that we never know when we might be in need ourselves. We should also never forget that we all have gifts to share. Because we can also be emotionally and spiritually poor. We can have all the money in the world and still be in need. When we support each other, our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs are met together in Christ. We respond to God's grace by reaching out to each other and helping each other with whatever needs we have.

This idea is carried forward in 2 Corinthians, and it helps us to think about how much we are willing to do. That those who sow a small number of seeds will get a small crop, and those who sow a generous number of seeds will reap a generous crop. That the more that we do, the better the return will be. That if we are only willing to do a little, we will see a little bit of God's grace. If we are willing to respond a little bit to God's grace, then we will recognize a little bit of it. And I say it that way because God's grace is there, but when we withhold ourselves from that grace, it makes it much harder for us to acknowledge it. But if we give without hesitation and we are cheerful with our giving, it opens our eyes to God's grace. It lets us see what is there for us. It lets us recognize that God will prepare us for every kind of grace. That when we join together in God's grace, there will always be enough for all. That when we take away the selfish desire to think that we are the ones who are doing everything and we accept that it is by God's grace that we have enough to give, we can recognize that God is the one who supplies the seed for planting. That God is the one who provides what we eat. That the crop we see increased is righteousness. And if God has provided, we can trust that God will continue to provide and increase what we have so that we may share it together. That as individuals, we may do what we can in order to help others. That we can recognize that God is with us when we give. And it's not always just about giving because somebody has a physical need. We are called to give for every need that we may have. It is just easier for us to visualize the physical needs we have. But we are called by grace to help with physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

We see that when Jesus is moved with compassion in our Gospel reading. He is thinking about the crowds that have flocked to hear him and he feels sorry for them. He is moved with compassion because they have nothing to eat. If they're sent away, they won't have enough strength to get home. And the disciples are full of doubt, thinking that there's no way they can do anything about this. A doubt that is all too common today. Because we all too often are stuck thinking about how hard it is to do something instead of finding what we can do. So, Jesus asks how much they have, and they have seven loaves of bread. Jesus takes the bread, and he gives thanks, and he breaks it and gives it to the crowd. And he blesses a few fish, and they hand those out as well. And the seven loaves become seven baskets of leftovers. Now, I want to step past the miracle here, which may sound funny. This is a reading about a miracle, shouldn't that be the focus? But I wanted to look at why Jesus did what he did. Because the why relates to how and why we respond to God's grace with compassion. Jesus could do something, so he did something. He feels sorry for the crowds he acts to help those in need. Not because a sign was demanded. Not because the crowds were demanding he feed them. It was because of concern and generosity. That touched me when reading this account again. Because I see it as Jesus showing the disciples that they have to try to do what is right. See, the disciples weren't even sure they were going to try to do anything. All they could do was think about how impossible the situation was. Not if there was something they could do, however small. They were stuck thinking about how much they couldn't do.

We can get stuck thinking about all the things we aren't able to do and can lose sight of the good we can do for others. We lose sight of even the small things we can do to support each other physically, emotionally, and spiritually. If someone is in need, we are called to help. If someone is facing a loss, we can go and give comfort. We can pray with them. We can sit with them, because sometimes just being there is enough. Maybe we deliver food because it is one less thing to worry about, one less thing to do. When somebody is sick or recovering, we help with whatever they may need. Maybe we mow their lawn because we know it is something they won't be able to do themselves. Maybe it is as simple as taking their mail in for them. Maybe it is picking up groceries and delivering them. Maybe they just need a ride to the doctor. Maybe they need someone to take them to get their hair done. We think of the little things because sometimes it is the little things that we desperately need. When people are coping with any kind of struggle, with addiction, with depression, with chronic illness, with a mental health crisis, with a crisis of faith, whatever the need is, we are called by God's grace to respond with compassion. The good news is that we aren't called to perform a miracle every time. Because God calls us to respond. Even if it is just being there, sometimes your presence is enough, because you being there is sharing the peace and the hope of Christ with another. Maybe somebody just needs a shoulder to cry on, and by God's grace, your shoulder is there. Maybe they just need someone else to be strong so they can be weak for a moment. And by God's grace you can be that strength. But we can only do this if we are willing to try.

That is the thing with our works of mercy. We have to be willing to do them. Will we get it right every time? Probably not. But we still have to try. Because God will be there to help us to do them. When we are blessed by God's grace, we are called to share that blessing. When we have enough to share, we share. We give what we can for any who are in need because we know what Christ gave because of our need. When we can give of our time, we give of our time. We visit the prisoner, the sick, the homebound, whoever is in need. Because we are called to share God's grace with all. That is what our compassion is about. It is about accepting that grace and sharing it with others. It is what we do in the face of any hardship. Our acts of compassion are simply people helping people because of Christ's love for us. Because we know God's grace is there for all. Because the Holy Spirit has moved us to help those in need. Because our Heavenly Father has called us to care. Because we are called to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. That we love God with our devotion and our worship, and we put that love into action with our compassion and in seeking justice. So let us be moved to compassion for all those who are in need with whatever need they have. May we walk with Christ that Christ may fulfill that need. Let us always be willing to share the love of our heavenly Father because that love will fill any void. Let us always walk with the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit will guide us to help those who are in need. Let us walk by faith in God's grace that we as individuals may help all that we can because of all that we can do because Christ is with us. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Means of Grace

This series is all about how we experience and share God's grace. "Means of Grace" is a four-week series that forks through the way that we understand how God works in our lives as United Methodists. We will look at both individual and communal ways that we live out the love of Christ in our daily lives through works of piety and works of mercy.

8/25: Devotion

9/1: Worship

9/8: Compassion

9/15: Justice

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Worship 10:30am

Toledo UMC

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Worship 8:15am

Etna UMC

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Worship 9:30am

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