

Beloved

A sermon preached at
Heart of the Rockies Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
Fort Collins, Colorado
January 8, 2012

We love because God first loved us.

1 John 4:19

Images of Compassion Voices of Compassion

This is the first in an eight-week series of sermons and Sunday school experiences focusing on compassion. An adult Sunday school class will feature a variety of persons – some in our church, others in the community – whose work expresses the heart of compassion.

The series will culminate in a visit on Sunday, February 26, by Amy Gopp, Director of Week of Compassion, the relief, refugee and development fund of our denomination, the Disciples of Christ (www.weekofcompassion.org). In addition to preaching that morning, Amy will be describing the work of Week of Compassion during the class time.

Texts: Psalm 29 & Mark 1:4-11

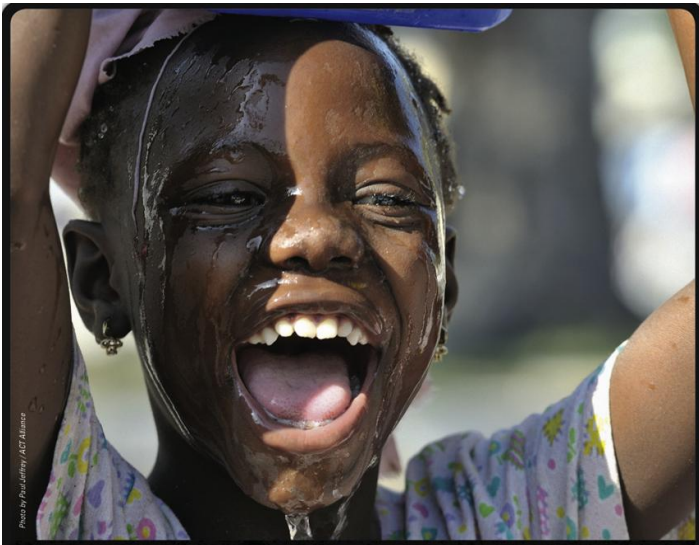
This morning, by way of Teams Worship, Outreach and Adult Education, we're beginning a series of sermons and Sunday school experiences that focus on the meaning and the practice of compassion. I have to say that a series on compassion seems like overkill for our congregation. I don't know of another church community our size that commits more acts of compassion in the community and around the world and in its own church family than ours. Really. Still, it's good to be reminded of the quality of God's compassion and our call to be a people of compassion.

The idea for the series arose after we scheduled a visit with Amy Gopp. Amy is the director of Week of Compassion. Week of Compassion is the relief, refugee and development fund of our denomination, the Disciples of Christ. We gather our congregation's offering for Week of Compassion once a year in February. That's when Amy is coming to our church. We give our gift once a year then move on. But every day, Week of Compassion employs our gifts in distressed places throughout North America and around the world. Last week's report told of grants awarded to mitigate the loss from last year's flooding in Missouri. Most of us haven't been thinking about the folks still suffering in Missouri, but through Week of Compassion you and I are at work to help alleviate their distress as well as the suffering in hundreds of other places around the world. Some of you will remember the Spring Creek Flood we experienced in

1997. As soon as reports of the flood hit the press, Week of Compassion called our office to see how our church had been affected and to tell us that they had put a check in the mail for \$3,000 for us to use in the community as we saw fit. They asked us to follow up with reports of any of our members and friends who would need further help. Week of Compassion grants – over \$50,000 since 1998 – have funded Janet’s and her colleagues’ efforts to train mental health therapists throughout the Middle East in the use of play and art therapy and EMDR.

Merriam-Webster offers the following definition for the word *compassion*: “sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it.” Compassion is something other than a feeling of pity, an emotion that’s often expressed with contempt or a sense of superiority. Compassion is more than sympathy, which is defined as the understanding of another’s suffering. Compassion is a feeling accompanied by an action. Broken down into its component parts, the word means to *suffer with*. It’s not just to feel for others in their distress. It’s to share in their distress. In the New Testament, on those occasions when Jesus is said to have felt compassion Jesus did something concrete to relieve the suffering he experienced (see Matthew 20:34 & Luke 7:14).

I chose as our first *Image of Compassion* the picture of this little girl in Africa. The picture was taken by a photographer for ACT. ACT is an alliance of 125 churches and related



organizations that work together in humanitarian assistance, advocacy and development. Much of our Week of Compassion funding is multiplied in its effectiveness through ACT, which works in 140 countries. I was completely taken by the look of utter joy on this little girl’s face drenched in water flowing from a well that had just been dug in her village. I assume that most of us have an intellectual understanding of the importance of clean water and how scarce it is in many places around the world. But I’m presuming that, having at least two or three faucets readily

available in our homes – which we too often leave running – it’s more difficult for us to connect emotionally to what it means for this little girl and her village: safe, clean drinking water, and the time it may have taken children to walk miles to fetch water that can be spent now in a classroom.

...More difficult maybe for us to realize the importance of water in Old and New Testament times. Water played such a pivotal role in the life and the health, the history and politics and writings of the day – from the Israelites deliverance from slavery through the parting of the Red Sea to God’s quenching of their thirst in the desert, to their crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land. In the Book of Second Kings there’s an amazing story

about how King Hezekiah led the construction of a tunnel through the solid rock of the mount on which Jerusalem is built in order to supply the city with water during a sustained siege (II Kings 20:20). You can walk through that tunnel today, marks of the ancient chisels on either side, water still flowing at your feet.



Water is so essential to life. Each of us developed in the amniotic fluid of our mother's womb. Our bodies are seventy percent H₂O. It's not surprising that water became a metaphor for life and, in the church's ritual of baptism, a powerful symbol of death and resurrection. You know it's the abundance of water on our planet – seventy-five percent of the Earth's surface is water-covered – that paints our planet a beautiful blue against a black canvass. It's as if the Earth is a single drop of water falling through the desert of space.

On the church's calendar, we're into the Season of Epiphany, a kind of continuation of the Season of Christmas. The word *epiphany* means *manifestation* or *appearance*. It can mean a sudden insight. When we use the word in the church, it refers to God's appearing among us, here on Earth, "the Word become flesh and dwelling among us... full of grace and truth." This is why we were asked today to read Mark's account of Jesus' baptism, the occasion when the heavens were opened and God spoke clearly to announce that his compassion was at work now in his Son. It's Mark's way of telling us that God has come to make his home here.

Jesus' coming out to John in the wilderness to be baptized – his stepping into the Jordan and rising out of it soaking wet – his baptism was a metaphor, an enacted parable. *Into the flowing waters of human experience God has dared to immerse himself.* That's what the root of the word *baptism* means. It means immersion. Surely Jesus was fulfilling the requirements of an ancient Jewish ritual. But he was doing something much more. He was throwing his lot in with us: God's lot, God's love, God's wisdom and authority and truth and beauty. God, all in, through his son, about whom God declares, "You are my Beloved; with you I am well pleased." *Emmanuel*, "God with us" in the entire beautiful and broken wilderness of human life – sharing our joys and sharing in our troubles, and moving to relieve them.

In remembering Jesus' baptism, we're invited to think of our own, and to be reminded that those words God spoke over Jesus, "My beloved, with whom I am well pleased", God spoke them over us when we came up out of the waters of our baptism: "You are my beloved daughter. You are my beloved son." Our baptism wasn't first of all an effort on our part – or our parents' part – to fulfill an ancient ritual. The ritual itself is the church's way of saying, "We're all in, God. Like Jesus, we're all in. In it with you and in it with others. In it for the redeeming of life in all its places of brokenness and need." We're in it, because God was first in it for us. Our compassion is born and nurtured in God's compassion for us. As John wrote in his first Letter, "We love because God first loved us."

Just after I returned from El Salvador late last year, there was an article in *The Coloradoan* (12/16/2011, A1,) about members of the CSU chapter of Engineers without Borders. The students had returned from a trip to the Salvadoran mountain village of La Criba where, during the dry season, villagers have to walk more than a mile to gather drinking water in five-gallon containers. In March, the students will return to El Salvador and complete their project to bring clean spring water to the village and to train locals to maintain the distribution system. It's more than an engineering project for the students. Here's how CSU student Trace Krause puts it. "We want to engender an enduring, trustful relationship, share in [the Salvadorans'] burdens and embrace them as a part of our global community." Trace went on to say, "We're blessed here. It's not like that in a lot of places in the world. [In El Salvador] they carry water a mile on their shoulders. We're blessed, and we need to help others." There, that's another image of compassion. College students dripping wet in the Salvadoran humidity – as if they're just coming up out of the waters of the Jordan, at least one of them, Trace, understanding that having been blessed, we're to be a blessing to others.

At Assumption Abbey in Richardton, North Dakota, when the Benedictine monks complete their evening prayers the abbot passes before them and sprinkles them with water. Those of you raised in the Catholic Church – the Episcopal Church, too – you have experienced what I'm describing. As we bow together in the monastery's sanctuary – monks and guests alike – the fall of water drops serves as a reminder of our baptism, of our dying in Christ and being raised by grace to walk in newness of life. I'm hoping that this morning you'll be receptive to an experience of this physical reminder. Because I borrowed – well, the Catholics have a very sophisticated name for this – a sprinkler and bucket from our brothers and sisters at the parish of Blessed John XXIII. May you be en-couraged in this reminder that you are the beloved children of God, blessed in your baptism to be vessels of God's compassion in a suffering world.

[As the congregation was sprinkled...]

"You are my own dear daughter."

"You are my own dear son."

"You are my own dear children, with whom I am well-pleased."

— Jeff Wright
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