The Call to Compassion

We are called to be imitators of Christ who is the image of God among us. God is compassionate and so to share the heart of God is to share in His heart of compassion. Over the next few weeks, we will be asking ourselves how we live out of that compassionate heart. We will discuss together such questions as:

1. What does the word, compassion mean and how is it used in Scripture, both Old and New Testaments?
2. What does it tell us about how God relates to us and how we should relate to one another?
3. What situations call us to a compassionate response?
4. Is there a difference between compassion, pity, empathy, sympathy, mercy or grace?
5. How do we respond compassionately to the poor? The sinner? The sick? The lonely?
6. If compassion is the starting point, what follows?

Keep these thoughts and questions in mind as we move forward into our study.

Lesson 1: Definitions and Word Studies: English, Latin and Hebrew

A. **English Dictionary and root origin**

a. Compassion: *a feeling of distress and pity for the suffering or misfortune of another, often including the desire to alleviate it. Latin compassio = fellow feeling: from Latin com = with + pati = to bear, suffer. Literally – “to suffer with”*

b. Synonyms: Sympathy, compassion, pity, empathy that denotes the tendency or capacity to share the feelings of others. Sympathy signifies a general kinship with another's feelings, no matter of what kind. Compassion implies a deep sympathy for the sorrows or troubles of another, and a powerful urge to alleviate distress. Pity suggests a kindly, but sometimes-condescending sorrow aroused by the suffering or misfortune of others. Empathy refers to a vicarious participation in the emotions of another, or to the ability to imagine oneself in someone else's predicament: to feel empathy with a character in a play.

Discussion:

c. Describe where each word is the best or most appropriate emotional response to a specific situation. How do you respond to death of a loved one? Sickness? Loss of employment or well-being? When would it be
more appropriate to feel sympathy than empathy? Is pity ever appropriate?
d. Considering what these words imply in English, why is referencing God as compassionate an apt description over sympathetic or empathetic?
e. What situations move you to compassion? How do you recognize that it is a compassionate response and not simply pity?
f. How do you understand the sense of “to suffer with” as you consider in the previous question the situations that draw an emotional response of compassion? Also consider “the strong desire to alleviate the suffering”.

B. Hebrew: rachum: רַחוּם compassionate (from Rechum – womb) and is always used of God in the Old Testament. Related to the word: Hannon: חַנּוּן, the adjective “gracious”, also primarily used as an attribute of God.

What might be the relationship between the word, compassion and its root, womb? The womb is a place of birth – the beginning point. Consider that a compassionate response as the beginning response. What are the implications of compassion being God’s first response to our pain and suffering?

C. Scripture References.

From these verses, what do you understand about the nature of God and what brings about his compassionate response?

1. Exodus 22:21 – 27 (Focus on vs. 27)
2. Exodus 33: 12 – 23 (Focus on vs. 19)
3. Deuteronomy 13: 12 – 18 (Focus on vs. 17)
4. Nehemiah 9: 17
5. Psalm 145: 8-9
6. Psalm 78: 38 - 39

Summarize some of the key elements of God’s compassion toward His people.

Scenario: In Lethbridge Alberta in the winter of 2012 – 2013, two homes burned down. One house was home to several people in low-income apartments – their last refuge before having to live on the streets. Most neighbors did not like the kind of rough people it brought into the neighborhood. A woman that had over 30 cats owned the second house. Some cats were harmed in the fire. There was an outpouring of compassion from the community and several thousand dollars were raised to find new homes for the cats and the rebuilding of the woman’s home. No money was given for the people who were left homeless nor to rebuild the shelter they enjoyed. Discuss the reasons for this response and what factors affects how compassionate we feel.
**Week 2: Continuing our word study in Greek and the New Testament.**

Last week we looked at passages from the Old Testament in order to understand the compassionate heart of God our Father. Exodus and Deuteronomy taught that compassion must be selfless as God is selfless and no personal gain must occur from the pain of another. His compassion is for all. In Exodus 33, we read how important it was for Moses to know God’s presence and that we need to know God is with us when we respond compassionately. In the Psalms we felt the intimacy of God’s personal love and compassion as his beloved creation, even though we are but a breath of wind.

This week the study will focus on the New Testament and the compassion of Jesus. Let’s begin with the word used uniquely to by the writers of the New Testament.

C. Greek: *splagchnizomai*: to be moved in the inward parts, i.e. to feel compassion

**Original Word:** σπλαγχνίζομαι

Read what Charles Spurgeon said about this word in his sermon, *He was Moved with Compassion*, published Dec. 24, 1914, based on Matthew 9: 26.

**THIS** is said of Christ Jesus several times in the New Testament. The original word is a very remarkable one. It is not found in classic Greek. It is not found in the Septuagint. The fact is, it was a word coined by the evangelists themselves. They did not find one in the whole Greek language that suited their purpose, and therefore they had to make one. It is expressive of the deepest emotion; a striving of the bowels—a yearning of the innermost nature with pity . . . I suppose that when our Saviour looked upon certain sights, those who watched him closely perceived that his internal agitation was very great, his emotions were very deep, and then his face betrayed it, his eyes gushed like founts with tears, and you saw that his big heart was ready to burst with pity for the sorrow upon which his eyes were gazing. He was moved with compassion. His whole nature was agitated with commiseration for the sufferers before him. Now, although this word is not used many times even by the evangelists, yet it may be taken as a clue to the Savior’s whole life, and I intend thus to apply it to him. If you would sum up the whole character of Christ in reference to ourselves, it might be gathered into this one sentence, "He was moved with compassion."

As you look up these verses, discuss what kinds of situations moved Jesus to compassion? What was his action and what was his response?

1. Matthew 9:35 – 38. Glance over the stories from verses 18 – 34 and see how they build up to the compassion Jesus has for the crowds. How would you describe the issues that affect Jesus?
2. Matthew 14:13 – 21. Consider the context of this story. Jesus has just heard that John, his cousin has been beheaded. He is heavy with grief and in need of rest yet the crowd follows him and yearns for his teaching. How can Jesus feel compassion after all that He has been through? Do the disciples lack compassion or are there another issues involved? Read Matthew 15: 32 as well.

3. Matthew 18: 21 – 35. This is a parable and it is interesting that the writer uses the same word for compassion that is used of Jesus. What is he teaching us about one root or source of our compassion?


5. Mark 1: 40 – 45. This story is very early in the ministry of Jesus and Mark is the first recorded Gospel. What is revealed by this word in the context of the leper?

6. Mark 9: 17 – 27. The man in the story begs for compassion and the writer uses this same gut-wrenching word. What does this reveal about the father?

7. Luke 7: 11 – 17. Why did Jesus pick out this woman to do a miracle? What was her situation that particularly called for compassion?

8. Luke 10:30 – 37. Once again, Jesus tells a parable to illustrate a heart of compassion. What do you learn from the use of this word in this story?

9. Luke 15:20. Lastly, the parable of the “Prodigal God” (prodigal means lavish and wasteful – God is lavish and wasteful with his grace): We know that this story reflects God’s love for us. How have you personally experienced God’s lavish compassion?

In all these verses, we see that compassion is not a mild feeling but a deeply moving response to the plight of others and a desire to bring help and healing. As the people of God, as ones who have experiences such a huge forgiveness of debt, as those who have known a heavenly Father who wastefully lavishes his love upon us, what excuse do we have to refuse compassion upon another?

We will continue in the weeks ahead to look at issues within culture that can test our compassionate hearts. As you go through the week, take note of any experiences that move you to a compassionate response.
Lesson 3: Compassion in the New Testament Letters

In Lesson 1, we saw that God’s heart has always been a heart of compassion for all his people.

Question: Even though we know that God’s promises extended primarily to Israel, his chosen ones, do you believe that God’s compassion also touched other nations and individuals? Can you think of examples from Scripture? i.e. 2 Kings 4 (Shunammite woman)

In Lesson 2, we looked at the compassionate heart of Jesus and saw that the writers of the Gospels coined a word specifically for Jesus – a gut-wrenching outpouring of emotion for the sick, the outcast and vulnerable.

Question: What impacted you from the stories you read last week and did any one scenario stick in your mind through the week?

This week we will look at what the writers in the New Testament Letters had to say about compassion and how the Greek words are used in this context.

What you will note about the Greek words is that they build in intensity. All refer to a physical response to another’s plight or pain. There is a reason that we say “moved with compassion” for almost always there is a physical, bodily response. But each word refers to a greater intensity of physical response. Oiktermos is the most mild, Eusplagchnos is the next level and Polusplagchnos adds “very” to increase the depth of compassion. The word we studied last week splagchnizomai is the extreme form.

Greek words: Oiktermos: οἰκτιρμός, the Septuigent for רַחֲמִים (the viscera, which were thought to be the seat of compassion pity, mercy: We speak of our heart as the source of emotions but the Greeks spoke of their bowels as the home where compassion resides.

1. The following passages use oikermos:
   Colossians 3:12; 2 Corinthians. 1:3; Romans 12:1; Philippians 2:1.
   a. Consider the context for the word and how compassion is to be expressed and in what context.
   b. Why does the community of faith need to be reminded again and again to be a compassionate people? What keeps us from being more compassionate than we should within the community of faith?
2. *Eusplagchnos*: εὐσπλαγχνὸς - root meaning to having strong bowels; compassionate, tender-hearted. It is used beyond Scripture in the Greek writings of Hippocrates

The following 2 passages use this Greek word: Ephesians 4: 29 -32; I Peter 3:8 –
   a. Is there any reason why the intensity of this word is increased in these passages compared to the previous passages? Is the context any different?

3. *Polusplagchnos*: (Adds very) to the adjective) James 5:11
   a. Why is this verse in the context of suffering?
   b. How does the knowledge of God’s compassion help in the face of persecution?

   a. Is the context any different to give you a sense of how mercy and compassion differ? How would you define mercy?

We continue to see that God’s people are called to be compassionate and it is a message that has to be reiterated to us over and over.

Question: As you reflect on the history of the church throughout history, where and when have we excelled in compassion and where have we failed?

Question: Consider your own church. Where do you see compassion abound and where do you find it lacking at times? In what areas could we use some reminders today from the Scriptures or from one another?
Lesson 4: Compassion to our Enemies

We know that there are some issues and situations that make it much easier for us to be compassionate than others. We feel compassion for people that we love or are part of our family. We may feel compassion for friends and neighbors or people that we can identify with, but may find it hard to identify with situations we have personally never encountered. And then there are those that we have conflict with. How do we find compassion for our enemies? Most of us do not have many personal enemies so we will try to broaden that definition as we go.

Read Luke 6: 27 – 36 (Read verse 36 as “Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate”)

1. Jesus was asked, “Who is my neighbor”, but I wonder if he was ever asked, “Who is my enemy? Since they were being oppressed by Rome at the time, I suppose the answer was self-evident. Name some enemies of Jesus.

2. What are some of the phrases that Jesus used to describe the Pharisees? Can you think of any examples of Jesus showing compassion to the Pharisees as a whole? On the other hand, how did he show love to individuals who were teachers of the law? Read John 3: 1-15 of how Jesus deals with Nicodemus. Does he reveal any compassion in this story?

3. We do not know how much contact Joseph of Arimathea had with Jesus during his ministry but read Luke 23: 50 – 54. How is this member of the Sanhedrin council different from the rest of the members?

4. We know that Jesus had great compassion for the poor but we don’t often think of him revealing compassion for the wealthy. Read Mark 10: 17 – 23. How does Jesus care for this young man? Considering his youthful age, his wealth was not likely earned but inherited. Why might Jesus challenge this youth to leave his wealth behind? What is his concern for the wealthy?

5. It is easy to slap a label upon a group without seeing the individuals. Give examples of labels that are used to identify the enemy. Which if any groups might you generally feel negative toward? So often the true enemy are the extremists as the bad apples who spoil the whole reputation of the rest. How might we adjust our thinking in order to see and have compassion for individuals beyond the label caused by the bad apples?

6. Name some enemies specifically of Christianity today? How do we love our enemies and yet stand up for justice and truth and righteousness? Do our enemies have faces or are materialism, apathy, greed, and vanity greater
enemies than any one atheist like a Richard Dawkins or a Madeline O’Hare (the woman who worked to ban prayer in the public school system)?

7. Consider this recent example of two football players in the media: Tim Tebow has taken a vocal stand as a Christian and has not been received or treated well by the press. Jason Collins has taken a stand as an open homosexual to much praise in the press. Where might your compassion lie and what factors affect the compassion level of the general public?

8. Now think of Luke 6 in a more personal manner. Consider someone who has hurt you at some time in your life. What situations in their lives would move you to feel compassion and love? What situations in their lives might make you feel less so, and perhaps a bit hard of heart?

9. Can you think of a time in your life when you were really called upon to love an enemy and to pray for them? Has there ever been a time when someone tried to take something from you and in turn you offered him or her even more? Has anyone struck you where you have literally or figuratively turned and offered the other cheek? How literally do we live out these verses?

10. How has the church in its history failed to heed these verses and not shown love and compassion to the perceived enemies of the faith, increasing suffering rather than easing it?

There is a church in Kansas City called Westboro Baptist that has been very vocal and I would say hateful against homosexuals, Muslims, and many others. They have protested at the funerals of those killed in the Newtown shooting and Boston bombings because they see every act as God’s judgment. One woman left this controlling church and has written a book on her experience as a child there. She testified that they brainwashed compassion out of the children so that they would be hateful toward “sinners”. Her parents joined the church when she was a young teen and she watched her father turn from being a compassionate person to a cold, vengeful person. She had to separate from her family in order to leave the church, though she has some contact with her mother.

We saw last week how the church needed to be reminded over and over to be a compassionate people. The paragraph above reveals how disastrous it is when compassion is deadened in our souls. Apathy and compassion-fatigue can harm our ability to love as God has called us. How can we keep a heart of compassion alive in our churches and in our personal lives? Pray together for guidance in this area.
Lesson 5: Compassion between Religions

Karen Armstrong, author and once a nun, turned away from all religion and is now embracing a call to unite around the heart of compassion, which she believes is at the root of all faith. Confucius (500 years before Christ) is quoted as saying, “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.” Jesus reframed this as the golden rule, “Do unto others what you would have them do to you.” She believes that all faiths and religions, especially Judaism, Islam and Christianity are all founded on this basic law and that compassion is what we need to recover in order to live in peace.

Why did Jesus turn a popular saying around into the positive and what is the difference between the two statements? How might living the golden rule and compassion be connected?

Karen Armstrong’s Charter for Compassion  http://charterforcompassion.org/

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.
1. Is such a charter as this needed? What is Karen reacting to in religious circles where compassion is not the primary identifier of that particular faith?

2. What are some appealing things about her charter and what are some problems that you can identify? How could religions work together to relieve suffering in the world, which is the goal of compassion – to ease suffering?

3. "Religion is at its best," Armstrong writes, "when it helps to ask questions and hold us in a state of wonder - and arguably at its worst when it tries to answer them authoritatively and dogmatically." What causes strife between religions? How could a compassionate approach ease such tensions?

4. Does compassion have anything to do with our likes, dislikes or preferences and is that a good thing?

5. The Dalai Lama's has his bestseller, An Open Heart: Practicing Compassion in Everyday Life. How might the Christian response and mandate for hearts of compassion any different from a Buddhist’s response or other faiths? Does the motivation to be compassionate matter, as an example for a heavenly reward or brownie points verses selflessly wanting to ease another’s suffering?

6. Armstrong’s goal is to plant a deep-rooted desire for equality among all, especially those who have a faith-based life. Is their danger to making compassion the prime value overriding all other values?

Read John 4: 1 – 42, with the theme of compassion in mind

1. Consider first that the woman came from a different religious perspective than Jesus. How does Jesus engage in dialogue with her and what is the evidence of his compassion in the discussion?

2. Consider now that the woman lived a different moral lifestyle than Jesus. What is his response to her situation and again how is compassion revealed. If the goal of compassion is to relieve suffering, how did Jesus relieve her suffering though her specific situation may not have changed? Does compassion mean condoning?

3. What was the woman at the well’s main struggle and what did Jesus offer her? As we represent Christ to the world, what is the main gift that we bring?

The goal of this lesson is obviously NOT that Christians are right and everyone else is wrong, nor that we are unique in our desire to care for others. In closing, reflect on how understanding the forgiving atonement of Christ affects our hearts toward compassion and how our dogmas may sometimes hinder a compassionate response.
Lesson Six: Compassion and Justice

How an issue is framed and the language used can deeply sway our compassion monitor and it is important to be aware of how our emotions can be manipulated by rhetoric. The Abortion debate is one example where the Pro-life Movement, in order to garner better support from the general public, is reframing their language around the issue. In the past, the pro-choice movement was seen as supporting the woman and her right to choose. Pro-life supported the rights of the unborn child and the debate has raged over whether a fetus is “life”.

Reframed from “anti-abortion” to “pro-life” and most recently called “Bio-ethical reform” (see http://www.abortionno.org/) this movement has been consciously changing their language to sympathize with the woman as a victim, often pressured by the family or boyfriend to have an abortion when she does not want one. They feel the woman can be a victim of lack of proper information as to what a fetus looks like at various stages. They are also speaking of the “human fetus”, as any unborn mammal is also called a fetus. Rather than a whale fetus or any other mammal, they are talking about a human fetus, which reinforces the life of the unborn infant as a human life. By changing their rhetoric to support the woman as a victim, they hope to gain a more compassionate response from the public to limit access to abortions, for the woman’s sake as well as the unborn.

Another way of reframing abortion is to call the act “murder”. Therefore should a woman who has had an abortion be tried for murder or only the doctor? This truly does not sound like a compassionate response and most people would reject trying a woman for murder, but would prefer to prevent the abortion, rather than deal with punishing an offender after the fact. As long as the political debate is framed in terms of “Is abortion murder?” or “Should abortion be illegal?” the pro legal abortion factions will likely continue to win the debates. If one side appears to be dispassionate or extreme, they lose public favour.

But where does compassion lay verses justice? Many doctors say that it is compassion that moves them to perform abortions, for they do not want desperate women going to “back alley specialists” as happened in the 1950’s or taking other desperate actions that risk their own lives as well as the unborn.

QUESTION: What is our compassionate response to this issue and where should our compassion be directed? (To be asked again at the end of the study)

1. What Biblical direction do we get for this issue? Look up the following sets:
   a. Ecclesiastes 11:5  II Kings 8:12  Exodus 21: 22
   b. Jeremiah 1:5  Psalm 139:13 – 16  Job 31:15
   c. Romans 9:11  I Corinthians 3: 16 – 18
   d. Numbers 5: 18, 27
2. Beyond specific verses these themes are evident throughout Scripture:
   a. Human life is created in the image of God
   b. All life is deemed sacred
   c. Children are a blessing – good to have a quiver full!
   d. Life is recognized in the womb and formed by God
   e. Killing of the innocent is condemned
   f. Justice for the most vulnerable taught

3. This year, Oklahoma passed what is considered the most far-reaching ultrasound law in the country. Before permitting an abortion, it requires doctors to do an ultrasound and provide a detailed description of the fetus that includes the dimensions of the embryo and the presence of internal organs. It requires that there be a scientifically accurate description of what is being seen: (see: http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128212951) How do you feel about such a law and what it is endeavoring to do? Should a woman be required to see an ultrasound and listen to the heartbeat of the unborn child before an abortion would be granted? Do you personally think this would change the compassion of the woman toward the child?

4. It is believed that a human fetus can feel pain after 20 weeks – should that affect the compassion level of the mother? Doctor?

5. Pro-choice advocates use language such as “procedure”, “termination” and how does that dampen compassion toward either mother or unborn child?

6. Life verses quality of life: Should a child be born into poverty? An unloving home? Should a young girl have her whole life changed because she must now care for an infant? Is adoption an easy answer? Where does our compassion lie in this argument?

7. The Center for Bio-ethical Reform has launched the Matthew 28:20 program to target churches that are not taking enough action against abortion. They also quote Matthew 15:8: These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me. Not only is the church to make disciples of all the nations, it is also to then to “[teach] them to observe all that [Jesus] commanded.” Quoting from their material: Sadly, many churches are not teaching their congregation that abortion is an act of violence that sheds innocent blood (which Jesus explicitly condemns). The Matthew 28:20 project is aimed at helping teach churches that abortion is the absolute antithesis of justice and mercy. So long as particular pastors refuse to teach their congregation regarding this painful truth, and until the practice of abortion is ended within the church, it will never be ended within the population at large. How do you respond to this approach for churches? Are we doing enough as the Christian Church around this issue and what is a compassionate but just response?
Lesson Seven: Compassion and Same-gender Attraction (Part 1)

There exists a percentage of the population that experience same gender attraction. Whether it is nature or nurture is beyond this discussion. It is simply a reality that within our churches are those who self-describe as homosexual or have family or friends who do. How do we facilitate discussion for embracing all in our sexual brokenness while seeking Spiritual wholeness and purity as a community under Christ? This study looks at the CBWC values taken from their website in regards to homosexuality.

Biblical Framework
The CBWC believes in “The divine inspiration of Holy Scripture and its entire trustworthiness and supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct” yet recognizes no outside authoritative body or source for the definitive interpretation of the Scriptures. It may not be enough to say we are “biblical” in our response, yet have a clearly defined Scriptural basis for our response. In the matter of same-gender attraction, most congregants of the CBWC would interpret the following texts as a condemnation of homosexual activity rather than one’s sexual orientation.

The following passages refer to homosexual activity. The notes state first the most common interpretation and secondly the rebuttal to that interpretation. These are not my personal views (author Faye Reynolds) but a summary of the arguments. Discuss together how you view the validity of the counter-arguments.

OLD TESTAMENT
Genesis 1 – 2: Creation: No mention of any other creative desires of God beyond man and woman in monogamous covenantal relationship. Critics challenge the ideal vs. reality, such as prohibiting divorce is an ideal but not the reality. We are all fallen broken people and we’re not in the Garden of Eden any longer.

Genesis 19: 1 – 9: Sodom and Gomorrah’s sin and the consequences: Rather than the blatant homosexual acts, some interpret the grave sin as lack of hospitality and abusive behavior toward a stranger, not speaking to a mutual loving same-gender relationship.

Leviticus 18:22, 20:13: Holiness Code: Laws designed to separate Hebrews from all other races – call to ethical, sexual and moral purity. But as many of the purity laws in the same section are no longer followed, some see this code as obsolete.

NEW TESTAMENT
It is argued that Jesus never spoke out against a homosexual lifestyle. Yet from his words recorded in Matthew 19:4-6: And Jesus answered and said to them; “Have you not read that He who made them in the beginning, made them male and female, and He said: ‘for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh.’ So then they are no longer two, but one flesh”. Jesus strongly affirms God’s desire for the covenantal unity of male and female.
Romans 1: 26 – 27: This is the strongest NT condemnation of homosexual behavior of both men and women because they have not looked for God as revealed around them and instead worshipped their own selfish inclinations. Critics claim that this is a condemnation of heterosexuals committing homosexual acts, not those whose natural orientation is toward same-gender companions.

I Corinthians 6:9; I Timothy 1: 10 – gives a list of behaviors Christians must avoid as ungodly. Others say a list of vices associated with heathen religions and practices of temple prostitution but again not referring to a loving same-sex relationship.

Interpreting Scripture may not always be black and white. The Bible does not appear to categorically forbid monogamous, loving same-gender relationships but condemns all abusive, illicit relationships, both heterosexual and homosexual. (Author notes that statistically, few homosexual relationships are monogamous) The CBWC validates the clear teaching from creation (both in Genesis and in the words of Jesus in Matthew 19:4-6), that a heterosexual relationship between one man and one woman is God’s design and desire for us. The CBWC only affirms marriage as between a man and woman.

Theological Principles

The CBWC believes in the value of each human being as created by God. In this, no person would ever be turned away from the community of faith. We also believe in the universal sinfulness of humankind since the fall, which alienates all from God and subjects all to condemnation. We are a gracious community who recognizes that we are all on a journey of being matured into the image Christ, but our sinful natures still raise their ugly heads. (Sin defined as falling short of God’s intended design [glory] for our lives). We all struggle with insecurity, selfishness, greed, impure thoughts, unbridled anger, gossip and malicious intent. We know God desires better for us.

In this we affirm the illuminating, regenerating, indwelling and sanctifying work of God, the Holy Spirit, in the believer. The greatest challenge of the Christian community is to know when to speak into another’s life where sin is diminishing the person God intended, or recognize behaviors that harm the loving community God desires us to be. When do we deal with a speck in another’s eye while dealing with logs in our own? (Matt. 7: 3 – 5) It is God’s spirit within us that convicts us of sin and thus brings the power to change (John 16:8). Tension is created where a community is convicted of another’s sin, but the individual has not experienced that same conviction.

The CBWC holds to the general principle of “belong, believe, become” in that we invite and welcome any to participate in the fellowship of the gathering community of faith before adhering to the beliefs of that community. Once acknowledging a desire to become a follower of Jesus Christ, the community of faith comes alongside as together by grace we are formed into the likeness of the One we follow.
Question: For one who self-describes as homosexual, do we have a compassionate response toward them in our church fellowships? Do we allow them to belong to the community of faith, even if their belief isn’t the same as the church? What does it mean to belong? Could a church baptize one into the community who proclaims Jesus as Lord but still practices a gay lifestyle? Is compassion appropriate (to ease another’s suffering) or would “tough love” called for?

Understanding that we are loved and received by Christ “while we are yet sinners”, we are also called to “go and sin no more”.

1. Is same-gender attraction sin? Is the inclination or only acting upon that inclination considered falling short of God’s best?
2. A percentage of people have homosexual orientation – does this mean they are forbidden to know sexual intimacy and should live a celibate life? If we believe so, how do our pastors and we communicate this in a loving way?
3. There are times when a follower of Christ might challenge the lifestyle of another who also self-identifies as a follower of Christ. The Scripture offers clear guidance when one has sinned against another. (Matt 18: 15 – 17) It also offers an example of heterosexual immorality that was addressed as it affected the life of the faith community. (I Cor. 5) Belonging to a community of faith invites that community to speak into one’s spiritual life. But this is very difficult to do and we are generally not very good at it. Can you think of times when a person’s lifestyle was addressed by the church community?

Question: What is God’s best for one whose sexual orientation is toward their same gender and yet they desire to live a moral and ethical life as a follower of Christ? What is our most loving response?

Most within the Christian community would see celibacy as God’s best beyond the heterosexual marriage. We would consistently expect single men and women to live celibate as well as those whose spouse was made impotent due to accident or illness. Without minimizing the gift of sexual pleasure and its importance in developing relational intimacy, as well as recognizing celibacy as a spiritual gifting, sexual gratification is not viewed as essential for a joyful, abundant life. Society wants to paint us all as primarily sexual beings. How does this do a disservice to all of us in our relationships?

I understand that this is a difficult subject with no easy answers. We know that we are called to love one another and we know that we are all sinners. We know that we are not consistent in dealing with sexual immorality within the church and we know that we do not live up to God’s ideals for man and woman, as revealed in the rampant divorce rate even within the church. I repeat the primary question – what is God’s best desire for each of us, even though we repeatedly fail?
Lesson 8: Compassion and Same-gender Attraction (Part 2)

Last week we studied the passages that reference homosexual activity and struggled with the question of whether homosexual orientation is a sin or only acting upon it. We continue to seek how we welcome into the church self-identifying gay and lesbian believers without necessarily affirming and active lifestyle. The largest question facing the church is whether a monogamous committed same-sex relationship can be honored by God and accepted within the church family.

Social Implications

Society will always push the Christian community to adopt its standard of goodness and morality. Our crimes against humanity are identified with labels such as “homophobic” “patriarchal”, “sexually repressive”, “judgmental”, “hypocritical” and the like and these are difficult for the church to shed. The community of Christ will never be popular.

While we may find some sympathy toward a monogamous covenantal same-gender relationship, this stand will not satisfy society’s cry for tolerance above all else. There are several categories for sexual orientation that will not be compatible with a Christian’s morals and so the church will never “please” society.

In the words of Paul in I Cor. 5: 12: What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Society is free to define its social constructs and though our voice may occasionally be invited into the dialogue, the Judeo-Christian tradition’s influence will continue to weaken.

1. Society may recognize same-gender unions but as followers of Christ must we follow suit and recognize same sex marriages or should we continue to define and sanctify marriage from the words of Jesus in Matthew?
2. Presently no CBWC clergy can officiate or take part in a same-sex marriage or blessing. Could there room for our clergy to participate in a civil ceremony apart from the church community as a social construct, not a holy sacrament?
3. Is there room to bless a covenantal union that would not be declared a marriage?

To allow same-sex unions is often referred to as the “harm-reduction” model. A homosexual lifestyle of multiple partners is very unhealthy and there are many health risks associated with the gay lifestyle. Regional health reports on the financial costs to the system by the homosexual community are often stifled as politically incorrect, but there have been higher rates of domestic violence reported as well as significantly increased health risks. The media can give us false ideas of the homosexual lifestyle through shows like Modern Family as a normal, healthy alternative. Statistically this would be an exception rather than the rule.
4. Is it a compassionate response to encourage a healthier life by holding gay couples to the same standards as heterosexual couples, calling for faithfulness in covenental union?

5. Some lesbian couples have chosen to live celibate but in a covenental friendship. How might the church respond to this arrangement? Is it unrealistic to ask this of all couples?

6. We wrestle with gay and lesbian couples, but how do we show compassion to the other categories such as bi-sexual, transgendered, queer?

7. Do we teach enough about sexual purity and wholeness within our churches? How do we handle such prevalent issues such as pornography, and internet

**Study Matthew 19: 1 – 12 and I Peter 2** in light of the call for the community of Christ to be “set apart” from worldly values. We are called to be a holy people so:

1. Is there room today for the church to live a new holiness code under the guidance of the Sermon on the Mount and other teachings of Jesus?
2. What would such a holiness code include?
3. How might we be set apart and yet still be a compassionate people toward the hurts of society?

**Summary**

- There will always be ways to reinterpret Scripture and so “sola Scriptura” will not be enough.
- We will never please society. They will always push ethical and moral standards beyond our boundaries.
- We must have a consistent loving response to all without necessarily accepting all behaviors as God’s best for his beloved. Tolerance is not a biblical standard or indicator of a loving response.
- A stronger Scriptural basis may be a thorough study of Matthew 19: 1 – 12 as well as I Peter 2 in light of the call to be “set apart”.
- Rather than insisting society heed our Judeo/Christian code of ethics and morality, we “set them free” to live according to their own social morays in a pure separation of church and state. As in the European model, marriage by the State would be a separate ceremony from the church blessing.
- We dearly desire to discover God’s best for one another as a loving community of faith.
- We must speak more boldly about issues of purity and wholeness, addressing the broader issues of sexuality and emotional health.
Lesson 9: Compassion and Poverty/Compassion Fatigue

There is hardly a day goes by when some call or mail or plea on television is asking for money. We seem to just recover from one natural disaster when another strikes and resources are needed. It is very difficult to give to every cause, and yet how do we decide which is most worthy? What causes tug at our heartstrings more than others and when are we excited to help another and when does it feel like duty or obligation?

Discuss together when you are more likely to give to a cause than to others.

There is a parable of a community that was known for rescuing people who had fallen into the river upstream. The people were always ready to help save a wet soul from drowning and provide what they needed. At one point, someone said that they should really travel upstream to see why so many people were falling into the river. In a similar vein, it has been said that it is one thing to help the poor soul beaten by robbers on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho but at some point, someone ought to get rid of the robbers!

This illustrates the tension between justice and compassion. Justice wants to get to the root cause and stop the bleeding, rather than to continually bind the wounds. When it comes to issues of poverty, this is often what causes “compassion fatigue” in that the problems never go away. We can provide a meal or send some money for a well, or clothe one who is naked and feel that we have made a difference. When the person returns hungry the next day, or sold the clothes we had given, and we don’t feel that we’ve made any difference, it can make us pull away and give up.

Share any illustrations where you have felt used and your charity did not seem to make any difference.

I began our studies with distinguishing compassion from pity, in that a compassionate response is not simply to feel badly for another’s situation, but to engage a response to bring change. Compassion wants us to comfort a hurting soul, to stop pain because we are with the person in their pain. Compassion is not a distant response, but an intimate engagement to be with the other. When we stay detached from a situation or feel above the problem, we will not participate in the same way as if we enter into pain.

Read Mark 6: 30 – 44

We are revisiting once more the story of Jesus feeding the massive crowds who came to hear him teach. The disciples became overwhelmed with the vast need beyond their resources. This is a feeling to which we can easily relate, as the issues surrounding poverty are so complex that it feels like the black hole that no amount of money can fix. The disciples recognize the problem. They feel the people’s hunger as well as their own
hunger, but they also see the limited resources with which to make a difference. The story magnifies the gap between the problem and the resources. **Jesus needs to change their focus from one of scarcity to one of abundance.**

1. When you look at some of the issues facing countries like Haiti or those in Africa, do you feel that there is a scarcity of resources, or a distribution problem?
2. What are the factors that affect resources getting to the right places?
3. Can any of those factors be changed to improve outcome? If so, how might we be part of the change?
4. In God’s economy, is there enough? Consider that question globally – in the world that God has made, is there presently enough for everyone? Do we need to fear that food and resources will run out? How does a fear of “not enough” affect our ability to respond to issues of poverty with generosity?
5. What is the balance between being good stewards with management skills and celebrating the abundance with which God cares for us?
6. Beyond the miracle of Jesus providing much more than “just enough” but giving with abundance, Jesus is also teaching the disciples some management skills. He has the disciples break down the “problem” by breaking down the crowd into groups of 50’s and 100’s. How does this process help when an issue seems overwhelmingly complex? How did the disciples moving among the crowd make the issue more personal?
7. Again, not to minimize the miracle of Jesus providing for the crowd, but is there any possibility that the crowd began to share other resources among them? Could Jesus have been illustrating that sometimes there is more available than we think if we look for it? Discuss the pros and cons of this line of thinking.
8. Consider your own personal financial situation. Do you feel that you have enough? Do you live with the confidence that God will provide all that you need and how could that attitude feed a spirit of generosity? Have you ever “out given” God?

Parker Palmer in “The Active Life” believes strongly that there is enough and that Jesus is demonstrating a gospel of abundance in the economy of God. He also speaks of how compassion is more easily born out of personal suffering, rather than a place of ease. It is when we personally have struggled and failed that we can understand the struggles of another. If life has always gone our way, we may judge another for their struggles as “their fault” but when we have known failure or can see how we could be in a similar situation but for the grace of God, we will be much more compassionate and caring.

Our attempts at “fixing” things can actually be an effort to distance ourselves from the pain of others. The disciples wanted to “send the crowds away” so they wouldn’t have to face the problem and it fixed the immediate issue. They could find their own food. But Jesus had compassion, not just for their hunger for food, but their hunger for God’s word. Sending the crowd away to fill their physical hunger would have starved them from the teachings of Jesus.
Summary

As you have gone through this study together, it is my hope that you have not been left with more questions than answers. Certainly with the issues that we have discussed, there are no easy answers, or the church would have solved them long ago. We are striving to be God’s people and respond to the leading of the Holy Spirit and in some ways that is the most that we can promise our world, that we will do our best to listen and then respond.

A compassionate heart is centered in the heart of God. We cannot truly respond to the needs around us without seeing with God’s eyes, feeling with God’s heart and listening to the cries with God’s loving ears. The challenge is to discern how, when and what is our best response. Compassion is not a “soft love” but desires to discern the true need and is willing to take the harder road in order to meet that need. It is not simple platitudes but a whole-hearted response to make a difference.

As you reflect over the past nine weeks of study, are their any issues that you feel you have a better understanding or a different perspective? Do you have any clarity on where you might want to be more proactive in getting involved?

At the beginning we asked, is compassion something that is pre-planned or thought out, or is it an unsolicited response of the heart? What are your thoughts now on that question? Certainly, we have more compassion in areas or issues where we have personally been touched for it is easier for us to enter into the pain of another when we have some sense of what they are suffering. It is a greater challenge to find compassion for that which we have little understanding. It is then that we need to lean on the Spirit all the more.

Spend some time in prayer over the issues that touch your heart and ask for God’s direction as an individual, but also as a community of faith.

Ask God to sensitize your heart toward those to which you do not feel an automatic compassion because their story is not your story. Again, pray for your church and its response to these issues.

Grace and peace to you and thank you for your participation in this work of love.

Faye Reynolds
Women in Focus of the CBWC

Donations appreciated to continue the work of Women in Focus. Send your designated gift to the CBWC office.