

Prayer: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

"Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself." What was it Jesus heard that made him withdraw to a deserted place? The news must have been awfully terrible to make Jesus want to withdraw from his ministry.

Perhaps you remember the story. King Herod hosted a party at which his lover's daughter danced for him. He was pleased by the daughter's dancing and promised to give her whatever she asked. After consulting with her mother, she asked for John the Baptist's head on a platter. Why? The mother didn't like John the Baptist because he had told King Herod that it was wrong for Herod to take his brother's wife as his lover. Eliminate the critic was the mother's desire. The king carried through with his promise to behead John the Baptist and brought the head of John the Baptist to his lover's daughter. The daughter then gave the head to her mother.

The scripture then says, John the Baptist's disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus. The gruesome death of John the Baptist is probably what caused Jesus to withdraw from the crowds. Jesus' childhood friend and relative died at the hands of a king with a jealous, manipulative lover.

Can you imagine what it would be like to hear such terrible news? In recent history, we have had graphic videos of beheadings posted on the web by Middle-Eastern terrorists. I won't watch them. Just knowing they are there disturbs me.

Yes, Jesus desired to be alone after hearing of the beheading of John the Baptist. Can you understand Jesus' need to get away? Sometimes we forget that Jesus experienced the same emotions as we do. He was fully human and fully divine. However, we sometimes emphasize Christ's divinity and minimize his human nature. This is a case where the scripture presents Jesus' humanity.

Did Jesus have time to withdraw and mourn? No, the scripture says that the crowds followed him and found him, cutting short any alone-time Jesus desired. What did Jesus do next? **He saw the great crowd and had compassion on them and cured their sick.**

Jesus had compassion on them. Earlier in Matthew story of Jesus' life, Chapter 9, we also read of Jesus' compassion for the crowds: **When he [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.** (Matthew 9:36)

Wouldn't it have been easier on Jesus to have just avoided the crowds and gone on his way? He had reason to want to be alone with his pain at the beheading of his relative. But that was not the route that Jesus chose. Is there a lesson here for us?

What is compassion? It is not empathy – thinking and feeling what others are thinking and feeling. Compassion begins by becoming aware of others' suffering and then moves to action to relieve the suffering. Jesus didn't just empathize with the crowd, he had compassion. He was led to action to heal the sick and to feed them.

(PAUSE)

Not long after Rose Espinoza and her husband, Eliasar, moved into their first home in Brea, California in 1991, they started wondering if they'd made a huge mistake. "Boys with baseball bats hung out on the corners and they weren't looking for a pick-up game," recalls the electromechanical designer. "After a drive-by shooting on our street, we started to really worry about the safety of our then eight-year-old son, Chris. I thought, 'What had we gotten our family into?'"

The Espinozas initiated a neighborhood watch group, but the morning after the first meeting a clear message was spray-painted on their truck, 'Don't finger us, keep your mouth shut.' Rose knew she had to take a different approach to the problem. In September 1991, she transformed her two-car garage into a free after-school K-12 tutoring program, Rosie's Garage, complete with computers, books, and banners for kids who made the honor roll.

"We started by offering homework help and free lemonade, and 16 kids showed up the very first day," recalls Espinoza, who recruited high school students with solid grades as tutors. "This was the first tutoring program in the neighborhood, and it was clear that these kids really did want to learn."

Rosie's Garage literally transformed the Espinoza's neighborhood; within two years, academic scores went up and the crime rate went down. And it's such a great idea that it's spreading: there are now four sites one in Brea and three in the neighboring towns of Santa Ana and La Habra that have served about 200 children at any given time. (www.psychologytoday.com, December 30, 2016, Three inspiring stories of everyday compassion)

The Espinoza's exhibited compassion. Becoming aware of others' suffering and then moving to action to do something about it.

(PAUSE)

Where did Jesus get his strength to be compassionate? (PAUSE) From God. What is the source of your compassion, my compassion? The same. God. Second Corinthians, chapter 1, verses 3 & 4 explain compassion comes from God, the Father of compassion. **Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.** Because God comforts us, we can comfort others. God is our source of compassion.

I always find it interesting that science verifies what Christians have known for centuries. Not only did God direct us to love our neighbor as ourselves, but God wired us for such action. It's good for us to take compassionate action! Here's a listing of some of the benefits of being compassionate. Being compassionate makes us happy. In fact, being compassionate makes us happier than buying things for ourselves. Being compassionate makes us attractive to others and uplifts those around us. Being compassionate gets us out of a funk and boosts our health and longevity. Being compassionate is the natural thing to do. Yes, God has already given us this innate gift. It's natural for us to use it. Being compassionate is good for your environment. Being compassionate spreads like wildfire. Others catch it from you and are more compassionate. Being compassionate gives us more time. Yes, being compassionate gives us more time! Research has shown that when we are being compassionate we feel like we have more time and more money. In our busy world today, that's a real benefit! (www.emmaseppala.com)

I really don't need to tell you that being compassionate is good for you. You all know the good feelings you have when you help someone. But I am still amazed at how God takes care of us. God directs us to love our neighbor, but God doesn't stop at a directive. God wires us so it is a pleasant experience to be compassionate. We take pleasure in following God's directive and we feel good when we're compassionate. Sounds like a double delight to me: doing what God wants and having good feelings when we do it.

There is a lesson for us in this scripture. Following Jesus' example and being compassionate not only helps others, but helps each of us as well as our community. For this next week, practice following Jesus' example – be compassionate. Next Sunday at coffee hour, share with your table-mates how your week of compassion worked out.