

Mercy Me

July 24th, 2011
Luke 10:25-37

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This week we have been bombarded with stories and news about the famine in the Horn of Africa. The most severe drought in decades is threatening the lives of more than 10 million people — especially young children.



Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia are the worst affected. Insufficient rains have created drought conditions throughout the Horn of Africa — destroying crops and killing livestock. Malnutrition and disease are on the rise as families travel long distances in search of food. Record high food prices, internal conflicts, and insecurity in the region have made a bad situation much worse. The rate of refugees from Somalia arriving in southern Ethiopia has increased from 5,000 a month to more than 30,000 in the second week in June. Almost half the children arriving in Ethiopia from Somalia are malnourished. This is a horrendous situation that the world needs to respond to.

All summer we have been talking about the gifts of the Spirit, and the Spiritual Gift that we are going to talk about today is the gift of Mercy and Compassion. People with this gift demonstrate empathy through practical deeds toward those who are troubled in mind, body or spirit. The key to this gift is action. People with this gift don't just care or offer words of encouragement — they *do something* to help reduce another person's suffering. There is no question in my mind that Neil Matheson and Lisa Axworthy who do a huge amount with and for Canadian Aid for Chernobyl have the gifts of mercy and compassion.

As I pointed out last week with the gift of hospitality, some people have this gift in spades and have it at the top of their list. But even if it is not at the top of your list of Spiritual Gifts or not on your list at all, we are all called to exercise Mercy and Compassion. We are all called to pray, we are all called to welcome others into our homes and our church, and we are all called to help reduce suffering.

The problem is there is just so much.

The need is tremendous: whether we are talking about the approximately 2 billion people in the world who live on less than 2 dollars a day or people who are experiencing abuse or injustice at the hands of spouses, employers, or governments, or whether we are talking about people who are recovering from natural disasters like in Haiti and Japan or the 1.1 billion who don't have access to safe water or the 33 million suffering with HIV or the 300,000 child soldiers or the slaughter of the innocents in Norway; whether we look around the world or just our own country, our own community, perhaps even our own family, the need is so great.

I don't know about you, but my temptation is to become so overwhelmed I don't do anything. What could I possibly do? The small amount I can afford to give is a drop in the ocean of the world's great need. And then my mind starts wondering about the causes and long-term solutions of some of these crises. I remember 1985 and the Ethiopian famine very well. I wonder why we are here again today. Is it global warming? What about some of these corrupt governments and various rebel forces who are doing very little to help and seem to be doing more to prevent good aid from getting where it needs to go? And then I feel even more powerless to make a difference.

The story of the Good Samaritan is one that most of us are very familiar with. A lawyer comes up to Jesus to test him. They both agree that the heart of the Scriptures is summed up with the verse: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbour as yourself." But the lawyer pushes farther and asks Jesus "Who is my neighbour?"

That's when Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan – of the man who was a victim of robbery, of the two religious people who should have helped but didn't and of the one, a Samaritan,

who did. Why didn't the Levite and the Priest help? I have no doubt that they had their reasons. Maybe they were late. Studies have shown that if you are in a hurry you are less likely to stop and help. Maybe they felt helpless. Probably they were worried about breaking their own cleanliness codes. The Jewish people had all sorts of rules and regulations around cleanliness and you could be deemed ritually unclean for days if you touched something unclean. It was also absolutely forbidden to touch someone who was dead who was not an immediate family member. Perhaps they were afraid to take the chance. Perhaps they really didn't care.

Do you remember the Seinfeld show?

In its final Episode, which aired at the end of the the main characters –Jerry, George, Elaine, and a one year prison sentence for failing to help someone robbed. What happens is this: Jerry has just received a NBC to do a sitcom and the network is flying them all to But their plane encounters problems and they are stuck in Massachusetts.



1998 TV season, Kramer—receive who was being contract from Paris as a gift. Lakeland,

Killing time wandering around on the sidewalks in this quaint New England town, they become innocent bystanders and witnesses of a carjacking. Being New Yorkers and the kind of people they are, they make fun of the guy who is being robbed. Kramer, who has a camcorder in his hands, films the incident as a curiosity. They never lift a hand, never shout out; they are 10 yards away, and could care less. They just stand there and casually watch! The robber speeds off with the car and the police arrive late on the scene. With the excitement over, and the poor victim standing dazed in the street, Jerry turns to his friends and suggests they go get something to eat. They turn to walk off when the officer stops them and says, "Alright, hold it right there."

Jerry: Wha'?

Officer: You're under arrest.

Jerry: Under arrest? What for?

Officer: Article 223 dash 7 of the Lakeland county penal code.

Elaine: What? We didn't do anything!

Officer: That's exactly right. The law requires you to help or assist anyone in danger as long as it's reasonable to do so.

George: I never heard of that.

Officer: It's new, it's called the Good Samaritan Law. Let's go.

The series ends with them serving time. The critics hated it. But there was a redeeming quality to that last episode. For nine years Seinfeld's characters used, ridiculed, and made fun of everyone they met. The four of them were the Priest and the Levites of our modern world and in the last show they were held accountable for not helping, but in a way they were held accountable for not doing anything of value for the last 9 years.

One of the things I've noticed about Jesus in the Gospel stories is that he was always so grounded and real. Here in this scripture reading Jesus was talking to a scholar, someone who knew the Scriptures inside out and backwards—probably someone who was pretty “heady”. My guess is that the lawyer would have loved a good theological debate about what is meant by “loving your neighbour as yourself”—after all, that's probably where the lawyer would shine. But Jesus doesn't bite. He doesn't give statistics about poverty. He doesn't get into government or religious policy. He takes what is theological and theoretical and grounds it in a real life story about an ordinary guy needing help and another ordinary guy who made all the difference in the world to him.

Here's the thing. When Jesus looks at the world full of need, he doesn't see statistics. He doesn't see “a world full of need”. He sees Igor in Belarus. He sees Musonda in Zambia, Kyambi in Kenya, Sanjeet in India, little Jose Hernandez in Mexico, Yuka in Japan, Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma. He sees you and your need. And Jesus doesn't just see you, he loves you.

Can you solve all the problems and injustice in the world and provide for all the hunger and the thirst and the need? No you can't. You are not God. In a way that's the good news. You see we are not called to do everything, but we are called to do something.



Mother Theresa was certainly someone with the gift of mercy and compassion. I don't know if she was overwhelmed by the need that was all around her. But she seemed to understand clearly what was God's job and what was her job and she didn't get those two things confused. Listen to what she said about how God provided for the needs of her mission:

"When once a chairman of a multinational company came to see me, to offer me a property in Bombay, he first asked: 'Mother, how do you manage your budget?' I asked him who had sent him here. He replied: 'I felt an urge inside me.' I said: other people like you come to see me

and say the same. It was clear God sent you, Mr. A, as He sends Mr. X, Mrs. Y, Miss Z, and they provide the material means we need for our work. The grace of God is what moved you. You are my budget. God sees to our needs, as Jesus promised. I accepted the property he gave and named it Asha Dan (Gift of Hope).”

God knows the worlds’ great need. God knows your need. God also knows your limitations and he knows your potential. I believe that is the key. Mother Theresa said “I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God who is sending a love letter to the world.” If we were all willing to be the little pencil; if we were all willing to do what we can do, this world would be a different place. By the hand and the strength and the grace of God you can make a difference.

Like the characters on Seinfeld but in a much more serious way, one day we will all be held accountable for where we met and where we didn’t meet the needs of the world. May each of us see the face of Jesus in the face of the suffering person and hear the words of gratitude from Jesus: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me”. Let me close with a few quotes from Mother Theresa:

- If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one.
- Let us touch the dying, the poor, the lonely and the unwanted according to the graces we have received and let us not be ashamed or slow to do the humble work.
- In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love.
- It is a poverty to decide that a child must die so that you may live as you wish.
- Do not wait for leaders; do it alone, person to person.
- We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop.

This is not a summons to a life of guilt. *We are not called to weigh our spirits down with the sins and the sorrows of the world. Only a Christ can do that and live.* We are not called to do everything. but as we follow the One who died for the great need of the world and for your great need, we are called to do something. May we be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit in each day. May we be ready to reach out and respond by the grace of God and for the love of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.