

Do Unto Others, Week 4: The Sum of Everything

Matthew 7:12; 2 Kings 6:18-23

Intro Self

I have two kids, an 11-year-old daughter and a 7-year-old son. And they are firmly in the season of their lives where they love to intentionally get on each other's nerves. I mean, I think they genuinely enjoy seeing if they can get the other one to react. Of course, then it frequently devolves into crying and conflict, but for a moment, they get some kind of satisfaction out of annoying their sibling.

Well, the other day, my son found a pair of hot pink gloves—these gloves—in the bottom of the bin where all the hats and gloves are kept. Now, they were buried. We had all forgotten that these gloves existed. But when he found these gloves, they were a treasure. And so he puts these gloves on, and he starts running around the house, yelling about his gloves, making up a song about these gloves, the gloves are his new thing.

Now, I'm going to be real with you...I was ignoring this. Because it was random, and it was loud, and literally who cares about these hot pink gloves that everyone had forgotten we owned?

Well. Let me tell you who cared. His sister.

And I started paying attention when the songs started to turn to shouts. And now, we're not singing about the gloves, we are yelling at each other about the gloves. Apparently, these are the most precious piece of outerwear that we own in the Moore household. And so now, we're just fighting, the gloves are being confiscated by the adults, all of a sudden it's a whole situation.

And, for better or worse, for the children in the Moore household, when things escalate like this, when conflict is intense and tempers are hot, I always invite (require? Not important) our two children to do something as the energy starts to wind down and we're just in that quiet, kind of grouchy phase.

I say:

Give a hug.

Say you love each other.

And you don't have to be happy with the other person, you don't have to want to be in the same room with them, but before we move on, you have to remember and show that deep down, beyond the moment of conflict, that you love and value one another.

This is our final week in our series "Do Unto Others." And so far we've covered a lot of ground together, as we've

been talking about the way that our faith intersects with politics. We've looked at what the Golden Rule really means, we've been reading that scripture every week. We've unpacked the concept of Christian Nationalism and explored what we do with it and how we live a better a story. Last week Amy Boles talked about respect and how we treat people with dignity, even people we don't agree with or like.

And today as we wrap this up, we're going to look at the role compassion can play in this whole conversation.

We're going to look at the POWER that compassion can bring into a moment of conflict or a strained relationship.

Like I said, we keep reading this verse in Matthew 7:12, the verse that this whole series is based on. And a lot of what we've been talking about with this verse has really focused on the first part, which is what we know as "The Golden Rule": **(SLIDE) do unto others as you would have them do unto you.** But today I want to make sure that we don't miss the last half of this verse. Because even though it's the first half that gets put on shirts and stickers and really packs that memorable punch, there's something really important that Jesus says to wrap this statement up. Matthew 7:12 goes on to say, **(SLIDE) "for this is the Law and the Prophets."**

This idea of doing unto others as we would have them do unto us, this idea of treating people well and with kindness and respect and love and compassion...Jesus says—THIS is the point!

THIS captures the essence of what it looks like to live out our faith. It captures what we're called to do and believe. You know sometimes we make it so complicated with our faith. We make it so layered. And we have great questions and important scenarios to work out and all that stuff that's true but when it comes down to it...Jesus says all those things that you know...and all of those questions that you hold...all of the complicated scriptures that you're trying to figure out how to apply to your real life...ALL OF THAT...it all comes down to this.

To loving each other well.

Because if we're going to follow Jesus, the way that we live out our faith has to be more than the things that we know or the truth that we believe or the way that we feel or even the things that we do like coming to church. It has to be about how we're in relationship with other human beings who are created in the image of God and who are deeply loved and deeply flawed and deeply complicated to be in relationship with.

And so if we're going to talk about compassion today, let's understand what we mean.

If we let ourselves pick this word apart and look at the root words that come together here, Compassion is the combination of **(SLIDE) com meaning "with;" and passion meaning "suffering"**. That's like if you know the term "the passion of Christ" that's what that is referring to. So when we look at it like this, just from a very academic perspective, we see that compassion is deeper than a feeling or a gesture. It means to suffer with others. It implies showing love when it is not easy, maybe even difficult.

I would say true compassion give us the ability to extend beyond our immediate feelings and to hold on to the truth about who people are and the way God loves us, even when it feels very challenging to see people in that light.

Maybe like when you're fighting with your sibling over who gets the gloves. Maybe like when you're in the comments on Facebook trying to prove your point. Maybe like when you find yourself in relational gridlock with someone, trying to figure out how you navigate past differences that are deep and significant and have real consequences.

Maybe it's the hardest to have this viewpoint or take this action of compassion when we're face to face with

someone who is supposed to be our enemy. Or, if that's too big of word, maybe you don't want to lay that identity on anyone, maybe we could reframe that to someone who it's just really complicated to be in relationship with.

That's really the background of our Scripture story today that we read in 2 Kings. This is a complicated social dynamic. We're in the story of Elisha, who was a prophet from Israel back long before Jesus ever showed up on the scene. And so if you're Elisha, your whole job is to both speak truth to power and to communicate with God on behalf of your people. For Elisha, his people were the Ancient Israelites.

And the Ancient Israelites, they had some complex relationships with their geographical neighbors. Like, everyone wanted to be in charge, but sometimes they would team up, sometimes they lived in peace, sometimes they had a lot of conflict. And this was true with this group that we read about today, the Arameans. They are different cultures and faiths, they have different interests, and knowing what we know about how very different groups of people interact, both now and then, there was no real reason to see compassion enter this story.

It makes me think about this story that I read in Sharon McMahon's new book **(SLIDE) "The Small and The**

Mighty.” If you get the Midtown Message emails that we send out, I recommended this book a couple of weeks ago. And if you haven't read it, run, don't walk, to get yourself a copy of this book. It gave me so much hope and encouragement, and it's an incredibly interesting look at American History.

And towards the end of the book, she tells the story of the relationship between Norm Mineta and Alan Simpson.

Here's Norm and Al (SLIDE). Norm and Al actually met when Norm's family, who was of Japanese descent, was living in an Internment Camp in Wyoming. They were both Boy Scouts and while Norm's troop wasn't allowed to leave the camp, they were allowed to bring another troop in for a night of camping. Norm and Al were tentmates and spent the whole night pranking people and laughing.

Fast forward to their adulthoods, where they found themselves together again...but this time, in Congress. Representing people and causes on opposite sides of the political aisle, but still deeply committed to caring for each other. Here's a bit of how Sharon McMahon talks about their relationship in her book:

They couldn't have been more opposite: Alan was cowboy stock: large, pale, and steely. Norm was the son of an immigrant, with a thick shock of black hair. He barely came

up to Alan's shoulder. When you watch interviews of them together, they either spend all of their time laughing or trying to make each other cry.

Alan can't help but extoll Norm's virtues. "It's been a wonderful rich ride of true friendship...I really respect and admire him. And love him."

Norm says, "I'm a liberal Democrat. He's a conservative. He's a good Republican. So it's not that we had agreement on everything...we had fights in committees or subcommittees, and then we'd slap each other on the back and say, 'Come on, let's go have dinner.'"

What feels so special about these two is that is that it feels rare to me. I don't know that we get to hear these kinds of stories about people with deep difference, very opposite and maybe even opposed backgrounds, who lead with relationship and love. A lot of the time, the stories we tell now are more opportunities for gotcha moments, of losing the humanity of the person, of trying to build the case that it's us v them. There's almost an eagerness to get to take someone down so that we can be built up.

And I think when we find ourselves in that moment of feeling that eagerness, of wanting to drive the divide deeper, this story of Elisha reminds us that there might be a very different way. Instead of a take down, it invites us to

instead offer kindness and empathy. It invites us to find the shared humanity and the ways we might even love each other.

And not to be too rose-colored glasses here, because if you read this story, what you heard today, is that it almost doesn't end up like this. And what ends up happening is actually a big contrast to what the King of Israel wants to do. He sees this whole army, his enemy of the moment, in place, guard down, kind of confused about what's going on and he's like, YES! This is my chance, this is where we win. And he says, to Elisha, point blank, very eagerly, like, a little TOO eager, "can I kill them?! Can I?! Pleeease?"

And you get it. Because...that's what they were coming to do to them! They are at war. The King of Aram is out to get Elisha, especially, because he keeps having these visions and foiling his plans for attacking the Israelites. Everyone is at about a 15 with each other, this story SHOULD end one way. Someone should win, someone should lose, and people are going to suffer. That's just how it should go.

But it doesn't.

Because instead of more fighting, of more division, of more death and destruction and harm, this story ends with extending compassion. Elisha says to the King, "no, you're not kill anyone today. But what you're actually going to do

is feed them, help them rest up a bit, and then you're going to send them home."

And here's what the text tells us happens because the King does just that:

(SLIDE) And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel.

That was what Israel wanted. They wanted the Arameans out of their space, they wanted an end to the fighting and conflict, and up until that moment, they thought there was one way to achieve that. To fight as hard as they could. To make themselves the winners by whatever means was necessary. That's a familiar story. We know it well. We wouldn't be surprised if that would have been the way it went.

But don't miss this, it's so important...in this story and in our lives, right now:

(SLIDE) Compassion tells a better story. And it doesn't just have to happen in an Old Testament book of the Bible. I really believe it's possible and critical that we as people of faith create these moments right now. Because when we create compassion, we can change the story too. When we can create compassion, we can create future hope.

There's one more story I want to tell you today, about hope that's being created because of compassion. I heard this story as part of an interview on Annie F. Downs' podcast "That Sounds Fun." But it's not exactly a "fun" story, so just want to clear that up. But it's a good one. She interviewed a father and son, **(SLIDE) Jonathan Merrit & Dr. James Merrit.**

Jonathan Merritt is a pastor and author and he is a gay man. Dr. James Merritt is also a pastor and author...and used to be the President of the Southern Baptist Convention. And so you can imagine the level of tension and conflict that has come up between these two people. And as they've tried to navigate both maintaining and strengthening their relationship, they have both faced intense criticism from liberals and conservatives alike. Dr. Merritt said in the interview that he has been astounded by the number of Christians who have criticized him for loving his son. People who claim to follow Jesus but who think that the right thing for him to do would be to cut him off because of theological differences.

And in the same way, Jonathan has experienced that critique. How could he continue to be in relationship with his parents who are not affirming, who hold a viewpoint that is counter to an incredibly important piece of his identity?

They shared a couple of anchors in their relationship with each other. The first is that love is the thing they come back to, no matter what. When the disagreements get heated, when feelings get hurt, when they find themselves at a stuck place...the bottom line is that they are father and son and their love for each other is non-negotiable.

The second anchor is the value they both place on being in community with people who challenge them and even disagree. Jonathan shared this:

“I think when you cut yourself off from people who disagree with you, you cut yourself off from your greatest teachers. You cut yourself off from people who will ask you questions that will either challenge what you believe or help you to become more confident in what you believe. That being in relationship with people who disagree with you, they will teach you to love, teach you to be compassionate, teach you to be patient, teach you to ask good questions. I mean, we have a rule where we say that in our relationship that we will seek to understand before seeking to be understood. How we try to identify with other people and express genuine concern for their well-being.”

I think there's a lot of wisdom in this idea that we seek to understand before we seek to be understood. That we allow ourselves to let people embody their whole stories,

not just a caricature of what we think they are. That we look for opportunities to create care and blessing for people—even the ones we might be tempted to do the opposite for.

And so as we close, and I'll invite the band to come back up, I want to bring us back to the papers that you filled out during prayer time. As you leave, you'll have a chance to receive one of those papers. In a small way, you'll have the chance to step into someone else's story, and to hold that story in prayer. You won't know whose story you're holding, you won't know if they are someone you agree with or disagree with, you won't have that context. But you will have the chance to build compassion and genuinely care...and through that, to build hope in this place.

Let's pray.