COMPASSION

Steve Matthews

“In the Habit” session for use with devozine meditations for July 1–10, 2016.

MAKING THE CONNECTION

“Within the past week, three tragedies occurred within thirty miles of one another. The epicenter was Orlando. On Friday, singer Christina Grimmie was signing autographs for fans in Orlando when a gunman killed her. On Sunday, forty-nine men and women were killed in a gay nightclub. On Tuesday, a two-year-old boy was snatched and killed by an alligator.

“What feelings does tragedy evoke in us? How does the suffering of others affect us? Do we allow ourselves to feel the pain? The word *compassion* comes from Latin words that mean “to suffer with.” To suffer with other people means slowing down enough to accompany them. It means making ourselves vulnerable so that we can feel more than passing sympathy.

“Jesus is an amazing example of compassion. He modeled compassion in the way he lived. He invites us to be compassionate, walking a journey into vulnerability.” —Steve

MEET THE WRITER

Steve Matthews was a youth minister for more than fifteen years. He lives in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and is the Executive Director of the South Coast Mission Hub, a collaborative of churches sponsored by the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. Steve is also a spiritual director and a consultant working to redevelop parish ministries struggling with decline. He was a writer for *The Way of Pilgrimage: An Adventure in Spiritual Formation for the Next Generation*.

STUFF YOU WILL NEED

- markers
- index cards
- pens or pencils
- copies of John 11:28–44
- Write each of the following on a separate sheet of paper:
  > “sympathy = feeling sorry for”
  > “empathy = feeling with”
  > “compassion = suffering with”
- Write on newsprint or whiteboard this quote:
  “The most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen, or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.” —Helen Keller
• copies of the closing prayer—“A prayer of compassion from Mother Teresa”
  (http://thedailyprayerblog.blogspot.com/2010/05/prayer-of-compassion-from-mother-teresa.html)

PLUGGED IN

+ This short cartoon called “Brene Brown on Empathy” is packed with meaning, expressed in a light-hearted way. The clip expresses the difference between sympathy and empathy.
  (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw)

+ Gospel singer Mavis Staples sings “You are Not Alone,” expressing what a compassionate friend can mean to someone who is hurting.
  (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cYCp98McUc8)

+ The Most Beautiful Thing is an award-winning short film that portrays two high school outsiders learning to be compassionate toward each other.
  (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IP8psM4LWXk)

CHECKING IN

Begin this time with an opening ritual: a moment of silence, a short prayer the group says together, or a candle-lighting to symbolize Christ’s presence. Take a moment to claim the space and time as holy.

Say something like this: “Every day we experience judgment. Sometimes we feel judged when someone says something cruel. Sometimes we judge ourselves for not measuring up to expectations placed on us by our culture. We are also the recipients of compassion. When someone stops long enough to pay attention to us, to listen to us, to feel what we are feeling, our heart opens up and we feel more whole, more loving, more loveable.”

Invite group members to tell about a time when they felt judged or sensed that someone was showing them compassion. Encourage them to listen to one another prayerfully and without comment.

EXPLORING THE WORD

Scripture: John 11:28–44

Our culture does a strange dance with the notion of compassion. On the one hand, compassion is a nice sentiment toward people who have endured hardship; but compassion may keep people from taking responsibility for their actions or from being brave and tough in the face of difficulty. On the other hand, compassion is the path to transformation. When we are compassionate to ourselves and to others, we open the door to God’s love, which invites those who suffer to reinvest in life in a way that is authentic and powerful. Instead of creating excuses for weakness, true compassion gives us the strength to carry on and to share God’s love with others.

Invite the group to watch the YouTube video “Brene Brown on Empathy” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw). Afterward, display the three sheets of paper with the words sympathy, empathy, and compassion written on them. Invite group
members to reflect on the difference between empathy and compassion. Ask them to think about the word *judgment* as well. Invite discussion:

- How can compassion create energy for us to continue in faithfulness?
- What effect does judgment have on our motivation toward faithfulness?
- Is shame a motivator?

Read aloud John 11:28–44 as group members follow along. Ask these questions:

- *Was Jesus being more sympathetic, empathetic, or compassionate?*
- What else do you see in the story?
- *Is it possible that Jesus’ compassion for his friends created space for Jesus’s death-defying miracle?*
- Jesus could have told Martha and the others that Lazarus died as a result of his sins (this was a common belief). What is the difference when Jesus chooses to show compassion?
- What do you imagine the next day was like in the life of Martha and Lazarus and the community?
- *How would Jesus’ compassion have changed them?*

**SHARING IN PRAYER**

Invite several of the youth to read aloud “A prayer of compassion from Mother Teresa” ([http://thedailyprayerblog.blogspot.com/2010/05/prayer-of-compassion-from-mother-teresa.html](http://thedailyprayerblog.blogspot.com/2010/05/prayer-of-compassion-from-mother-teresa.html)):

*Lord, open our eyes*
*that we may see you in our brothers and sisters.*

*Lord, open our ears*
*that we may hear the cries of the hungry,*
*the cold, the frightened, the oppressed.*

*Lord, open our hearts*
*that we may love each other as you love us.*

*Renew in us your spirit.*

*Lord, free us and make us one.*

*Amen.*

**TAKING IT FURTHER**

Display the quote you have prepared, and invite group members to read aloud together the words of Helen Keller:

“The most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen, or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.”

Invite group members to describe, on an index card, one situation in their lives in which God is inviting them to go beyond sympathy or empathy to true compassion, in which God is asking them to feel with their hearts. Then ask them to write on the other side of the card a situation in which they need to offer a measure of compassion to themselves.

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