

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: September 29, 2013  
Sermon Title: Compassion  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: "Compassion Verses"

*The New York Times Sunday Review* section of a couple of weeks ago definitely caught my eye. The headline, above the fold, was titled "The Value of Suffering." The article contained this sentence, "Calamity ... breaks him open, moves him to change his ways. Sometimes."

The author, the renowned Pico Iyer, asks a good question: "Can one possibly find any point in suffering?" after listing an endless stream of tragedies to call forth a human response, some response, some compassion: tornadoes in Oklahoma, bombings in Boston, massacres in Syria, awful Iraq. And we could add a dozen more. He tells about a 90-year-old Zen painter from Japan, who says suffering is a privilege. "It moves us toward thinking about essential things and shakes us out of shortsighted complacency." He even says, "We should pay for suffering," because it is so valuable, "it proves such a hidden blessing." (Iyer, Pico. "The Value of Suffering." *New York Times* 8 Sept. 2013: SR1. Print.)

To be honest, this sermon is less about suffering than about its mirror image, "compassion." Pico Iyer reminds us that the root word for "suffering" is the Latin or Greek word for "passion." That's how we end up as Christians talking about "the PASSION of Christ," Christ's choice to endure suffering in order to lessen ours. And that's what makes for "compassion"; compassion is where we "join our passion with the plight of others."

We are going to break up today's sermon with Scripture, all stories of Jesus responding to human need with compassion.

Mike, please lead us in our first section of Scripture.

## COMPASSION Verses

Leader: "When he saw the crowds he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless." *(Matthew 9:36)*

**People: "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Let us ask God to send us more workers.'"** *(Matthew 9:37-38)*

Leader: A large crowd gathered; they had nothing to eat, so Jesus called his disciples together and said, "I have compassion for these people." *(Mark 8:1-2)*

**People: "Some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to heal him." And Jesus said, "I have compassion on him."** *(Mark 8:22)*

Leader: "Jesus, his mother, and the disciples were invited to a wedding in Cana. After some time, the wine ran out." *(John 2:1-3)*

**People: "(Jesus had compassion on them), so he spoke to the servants, who filled jars with water ... which became the best wine!"** *(John 2:6-7, 10)*

"Just do it." If we had read ALL the verses, all three sections, this could be the longest Scripture lesson, followed by the shortest sermon, if we would just agree to "just do it." Be compassionate. Show compassion. Emulate Jesus, who looked at people, "harassed and helpless," the Bible says of those people, and "he had compassion on them." Let's just do it. Be compassionate. Show compassion. Then sing the final hymn. Go home. And just do it.

As we wend our way through the verses this morning, that's what you'll see. Jesus just does it. Whatever compassion would require, Jesus just does it. See some hungry people? Feed them. A blind man comes up to you? Help him see. Wine runs out at a party? Get more. I included that one on purpose because it's not quite so obvious. Feeding a hungry person is sort of obvious. Making sure there's enough wine at a party? Not so obvious. Unless it's your wedding or your daughter's wedding. Then you want everything to be just right. So turning water into wine is compassion? Really? Evidently, really, according to Jesus!

Compassion, for the sake of today's sermon, is taking enough time to do what somebody needs doing. Let me repeat that. In the context of today's sermon and my goal for this little church of ours, is to find more people who will take enough time to do what somebody needs doing.

The reason for this sermon is fairly simple. I want your help. There are ways in which our church is already involved in acts of compassion. Sue Trischman leads our Member Care Committee. This is an official board of the church with elected members. They visit our church shut-ins, about 18 in number. They deliver the altar flowers as a sort of "pick me up" to different people each week. They offer themselves as hosts for funeral receptions, as they did this week for Sue Naff's family.

Then there's the Compassion Group, started by Brenda Steele and Jennifer Marcus several years ago, a group of volunteers throughout the church who do simple, thoughtful kindnesses all year long. It might be delivering a plate of cookies, it might be sending a note, it might be a visit. Just a way of saying, "Hey, we're here and we care." And Bob Evans has a team that does home repairs — sometimes for the elderly, sometimes for the disabled, or for a group that helps the needy.

I need two things. We can always use more people who want to help, *and* we need to know who can use a little touch of compassion. I'm asking you to be our eyes and ears, be in touch with me, let me know when you are aware: someone from our church is in the hospital; someone is having surgery; someone is in rehab, undergoing treatment, having chemo; someone is facing a crisis, a let-down, an obstacle; someone is in need, an opportunity, some way in which we could help. A job has been lost, a dog has been lost, a marriage has been lost, a hope or a dream or a plan has been lost. Let us know, whether it's about you or someone near to you.

Let me tell you why I need you. I'll give you a little example. I visit about 400 people at the hospital each year. Sounds like a lot, sounds like we're on top of things, doesn't it? We're not. I'm quite sure we miss 30 percent or more of our people who go into the hospital. The main issue is what's called HIPPA privacy laws that prevent hospitals from giving out information.

Earlier in my career, I could walk into a hospital and there would be a box at the front desk, all the patients catalogued by religion, by denomination, even by specific church, so I had three ways to cross check any person I was looking for. In addition, hospital chaplains would call me to alert me. None of that happens anymore. Not even the chaplains call. I've been your pastor here for 17 years, and I've had *two* calls from a hospital chaplain. In short,

we don't know who is in the hospital unless you tell us. That's just one example. I'm asking you to help me know where we can help, whom we can help, how we can help.

Now, I realize, asking for more compassion, more acts of compassion, is problematic. Talking about it is easy. Doing it is tougher. There are so many barriers, obstacles, to being compassionate. There's actually a popular term for it: "compassion fatigue." Folks just get tired of one more crisis, one more need. We get numb. We get desensitized. And we get cynical. We get mad at government waste. We get mad at fraud. At being ripped off, taken advantage of. We don't know which needs are real, which victims are genuine, which stories are true. And lots of things are simply beyond us. We can't stop world hunger. We can't stop bad dictators. We can't stop child abuse, societal violence, or chemical weapons in Syria. Well, certainly not by ourselves. In which case we're tied with Jesus! He didn't stop world hunger either. He didn't stop child abuse or violence or bad guys or war. What he did do was pay some real attention to what was right in front of him.

Mike, please lead us in our second section of Scripture.

Leader: "A Greek woman, born in Syria, had a little daughter possessed by an evil spirit. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter."  
*(Mark 7:21-26)*

**People: And Jesus said, "I have compassion."**

Leader: "One of the Synagogue leaders fell at Jesus's feet, and pleaded earnestly, 'My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live.'"  
*(Mark 5:22-23)*

**People: So Jesus had compassion on him and went with him.**  
*(Mark 5:24)*

Leader: "Some men came to Jesus bringing him a paralytic. They made an opening in the roof above Jesus and lowered the paralyzed on a mat."  
*(Mark 2:3-4)*

**People: "When Jesus saw them," Jesus had compassion on them.**  
*(Mark 3:5)*

Leader: "When the sun was setting, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness."  
*(Luke 4:40)*

**People:** **And Jesus had compassion on them, "laying his hands on each one, he healed them."** *(Luke 4:40)*

Leader: "When Jesus was in one of the towns a man came along covered with leprosy who begged Jesus, 'Lord, if you are willing you can make me clean.'" *(Luke 5:12)*

**People:** **"And Jesus (had compassion on him) reached out his hand and touched him."** *(Luke 5:13)*

Alida and I love to get out and see our high school youth in their various sports games. I even won the raffle at the Fairfield Warde Field hockey game this week! A basket of pink! Pink everything — pink tights and even a pink sports bra! At a Ludlowe game this week, we were sitting in the stands with church parents, including Becky Brown. That morning she had helped with the funeral reception for Sue Naff — three or four hours out of her day, just to help provide a compassionate closure for Sue's family and friends, a little kindness extended to 200 people touched by grief.

So we were sitting watching the Ludlowe field hockey team, and I took the opportunity to thank Becky for what she had done, helping Heather Lajeunesse, Dottie Baekey, and Gail MacQuarrie, bring just the right touch at just the right time. But she just smiled and said, "You don't need to thank me. Some people ask me why I do it. I tell them I love it so much. I wish everybody knew how much joy it is to help." That really says it all.

"Calamity breaks you open," I said at the beginning of today's sermon, quoting Pico Iyer. "And we should have to pay for suffering; it is such a blessing," a Zen friend told him. Well, maybe. That's sort of up to each of us. When tough things happen, some turn away. And some folks do turn suffering into blessings, and some just let it be. Sometimes the calamity and suffering happen to us, and we learn from it. Sometimes they happen to others, and if we allow ourselves to be cracked open, we can indeed be blessed by caring. Today I'm asking you to make our church — our whole church — a place of compassion, a place that opens up at the sight of need, a place that seeks blessing in every suffering.

You know, from time to time, I compare our church to others. There are churches with big parking lots, even a van service from the parking lot to the sanctuary. There are modern churches with modern conveniences of every kind. There are churches with plush stadium seating, Starbucks coffee in the lobby, surround sound in the sanctuary. There are churches with 15-, 20-

piece orchestras and large stage area, enabling live drama and living arts. We are none of that, never will be. But we can be the best doggone caring church on earth. THAT we can be.

All those verses we read today, little stories of Jesus having compassion on a wedding party out of wine; on a leper, an untouchable, cast out from all he loved; on a paralytic and a blind man, one unable to move, one unable to see; on crowds of people, "harassed and helpless"; on the dying and sorrowing, on the lost and lonely, even on the bad guys, the enemies as much as his own friends, "Jesus had compassion on them." It says that in Matthew 9:36, "Jesus saw a crowd harassed and helpless and had compassion on them." He did what he could. But in the very next verse, verse 37, Jesus speaks to us, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few." In other words, there's plenty to do and not enough folks to do it. What I'm saying to you today is there's plenty to do, but we don't always know about it. So tell us. And we need more folks to do it. Help us.

Let me close with a story I've told before, but it bears repeating. Three years ago I had a double knee replacement. Five days in the hospital, two weeks in a nursing home, another month as a hopeless invalid. I gave Alida very explicit instructions. "No visitors. None. Nothing. Nobody. No exceptions. No flowers. No cards. No food. No fuss. No nothing!" My first day in the nursing home, Mike Howard walked in with the altar flowers. The next day Jack Barry brought me dinner from Luigi's. When I got home, the West family not only brought me dinner, but they also sat down and ate with me. I tell you now those were three of the greatest gifts of my life. A little compassion. The right touch at the right time.

Mike, let's conclude with our third section of Scripture.

Leader: "As Jesus approached a town called Nain, a dead person was being carried out, the only son of his mother who was a widow."  
*(Luke 7:12)*

**People: "When Jesus saw her, his heart went out to her (and he had compassion for her) and said, 'don't cry'... the dead man sat up and Jesus gave him back to his mother."**  
*(Luke 7:13-15)*

Leader: "Jesus and his disciples were in a boat when a furious squall came up. The waves broke over the boat, and it was nearly swamped."  
*(Mark 4:36-38)*

**People:** **"Jesus (had compassion for them) so he rebuked the wind and quieted the waves and storm."** *(Mark 4:39)*

**Leader:** "Jesus came to Bethany to comfort Mary and Martha after the death of their brother, Lazarus. When Jesus saw them weeping, he also wept."  
*(John 11:17-18, 33-35)*

**People:** **"(And Jesus had compassion on them)," he was deeply moved in spirit, he wept, and then he called in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out.' And the dead man came out."**  
*(John 11:33, 43-44)*

**Leader:** Jesus entered Jericho; a great crowd came to him, including Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector who had cheated many people. Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, so he climbed a tree to watch.  
*(Luke 19:1-4)*

**People:** **"And Jesus (had compassion on him) and said to Zacchaeus, 'come down out of the tree, I will come to your house today.'"**  
*(Luke 19:5)*

**Leader:** "When they came to Golgotha they crucified Jesus along with two other criminals."  
*(Luke 23:32-33)*

**People:** **"(And Jesus had compassion on them) and said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'"**  
*(Luke 23:34)*

**Leader:** "One of the criminals on the cross next to Jesus hurled insults at Jesus. But the other criminal rebuked him, saying to Jesus, 'Remember me when you come into your kingdom.'"  
*(Luke 23:39-42)*

**People:** **"And Jesus (had compassion on him) and answered him. 'Verily I say unto you, today you shall be with me in paradise.'"**  
*(Luke 23:42)*