

“The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river. And she saw a basket among the reeds. When she opened it, she saw a child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. She named him Moses, ‘because’, she said, ‘I drew him out of the water.’” – Exodus 2

He was crying and she took pity on him. Pity.

In an episode -- *The Truth* -- of one of the greatest shows ever on television – *Seinfeld* – George dates a woman with chopsticks in her hair, who likes to massage the pronunciation of certain words to give them a sense of flair, a sophistication if you will. Like folks who derive “Targèt” from “Target” she elocutes paper-mache as “pappe-ay mache-ay” and Samuel as “Sam-u-EL.” Naturally, George comes to the conclusion, in a moment of pure lucidity, that it’s in his best interests to tell this woman the truth about his perception of her. Namely, that he thinks she is pretentious... Pretentious! So devastated by such a harsh assessment of her character, she promptly admits herself into a psychiatric clinic. A couple of days later, after George reluctantly agrees to visit her, he famously quips to his friend, Jerry: “I should be in a place like this. I envy this woman. You get to wear slippers all day. Friends visit. They pity you. Pity is very underrated. I like it, it’s good.”

Now, before we elevate one George Louis Costanza into the pantheon of Erikson, Piaget, and Jung, it might be prudent to first challenge his rather remarkable assertion. Is pity very underrated? Is it good? A good thing? Suspending all suspense: no. Pity is not a good thing. At least, not on its own. For on its own pity is worthless. On its own pity is easy. On its own pity is the excuse we hide behind when we can’t be bothered into sacrificing our own precious time and interests for the benefits of others. As Psychologist Aaron Ben-Zeev puts it: “Pity is spectator-like; we can pity people while maintaining a safe emotional distance from them. More often than not, pity involves the belief in the inferiority of the object, and as such, pity is related more to contempt rather than love.”

“A typical belief that we associate with pity is that many creatures in the world suffer, but a single person cannot do much to improve their situation. The suffering of homeless people, for example, is recognized by many people, but most think that they cannot offer any real help. At best they think they can pay their dues to the suffering by pitying them. Accordingly, pity is often sympathy for the helpless by the powerless-or those who consider themselves to be essentially powerless. Because then of its non-interventionary nature, pity is a luxury.” – Aaron Ben-Zeev. A luxury. A luxury of those who have the means, position, and time to feel it. A luxury that requires nothing of us beyond merely feeling it.

Now, now Brian. You’ve been gone for about a month, and the first sermon you aim to preach is a missive ragging on pity? How peculiar. After all, didn’t we began this morning highlighting pity as the vehicle that saved Moses from what, at best, would be an uncertain future? Yes, but I also think that’s a misfortune in translation. While our NRSV maintains “pity” the NET Bible and other translations employ “compassion.” And rightly so, I believe. Unlike the nuances of our own language, where each word carries its own oppositional force, the Hebrew and the Greek words for compassion and pity are always one in the same. But, I do not believe they are at all one in the same. They are not interchangeable, and, I sincerely doubt that the original writers, if transported through time to 2017, would argue the contrary.

But just for a second, let’s revisit that text from Exodus. What was perceived by many in Biblical times to be a womanly weakness – a soft spot for children – was yet a strong enough emotion to prompt this woman to defy even the strictest orders of her father, Pharaoh. She was no mere spectator then. She did not merely pity Moses, as the translation misrepresents to our eyes and ears. Rather, she was both decisive and directly involved. In short, she was compassionate.

“A crucial difference between pity and compassion,” Ben-Zeev goes on to say, “is that compassion involves far greater commitment for substantial help. Compassion involves willingness to become personally involved, while pity usually does not. While pity involves the belief in the inferiority of the object, compassion assumes equality in a common humanity.”

**Equality in a common humanity.** Before we left on the Mission Trip, I was commended by an older gentleman for helping to lead young people to express pity on others who are less fortunate. Honestly, while I understood the intention to be harmless, and I think well-meaning, it just rubbed me in the worst of ways.

I am not out to teach or encourage pity; to advocate that we stay on the sidelines, or in these pews, making sad faces at sad news and offering distant prayers and absent support. No, I’m out to get us and our children to take the next step. To show compassion. To get directly involved and do something. To travel 2,500 miles away, or even just right down the avenue, to make a visible and tangible difference in the lives of others. And honestly, I think we accomplished that in spades, both for others, and even ourselves during my week with the youth in Calgary.

Bar none, this was the best trip we’ve done. Not just for what we were able to achieve in restoring a dilapidated chapel, or feeding ~2,000 homeless people during the week. But for what were able to reveal inwardly about each of us. It should come as no great surprise that I think our kids are amazing. But it did shock even me, a bit, just how great. We had eight new kids this year. Eight first-timers. And immediately they bonded with each other, but more impressively, our older teens immediately bonded with them. Immediately, there was a sense of family. Immediately, there was a sense of safety. And that feeling manifested itself throughout the week, but no more strongly than when we were at devotions with each other each night. Our kids shared some really deep stuff with each other. I mean, some incredibly deep stuff. They opened up about fears, about anxieties, about their limitations and regrets, their vulnerabilities and difficult histories. And not once was pity ever circulated. Only compassion. I can’t begin to tell you how many tears were shed that week. How many hugs or how much love. But I can tell you that the mission of Jesus Christ was magnificently revealed.

In forgiveness and love. In self-sacrifice and love. In compassion and love. In love on top of love.

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Buried under the onslaught of the main-talking points this past week: Hurricane Harvey, the continued Charlottesville fallout, the pardon for Joe Arpaio, was a story in the New York Times entitled “The Two Americans” by Sabrina Tavernise. It’s quite long, but I encourage all, who have the luxury of time, to read it. In brief, her article narrates a story about two men, young Abraham Davis and older Hisham Yasin, whose lives crossed each other’s paths in western Arkansas last year. In October, Abraham got drunk with a couple friends and decided to drive to the nearest mosque in town. This mosque was founded, in part, by Hisham, and it was called Al Salam, which means “peace” in Arabic. While keeping watch in the driveway, Abraham’s friends painted swastikas and curses on the mosque’s windows and doors. The next day their vandalism made the news, and four months later, Abraham was arrested and faced up to six years in prison. Unable to post bail, Abraham awaited his trial from jail. And one day, from that cold cell, Abraham wrote a letter. It read:

“Dear Al Salam Mosque, I know you guys probably don’t want to hear from me at all, but I really want to get this to y’all. I’m so sorry about having a hand in vandalizing your mosque. It was wrong and y’all did not deserve to have that done to you. I hurt y’all and I am haunted by it. I don’t know what’s going to happen to me, and that is honestly really scary. But I just wouldn’t want to keep going on without trying to make amends. I wish I could undo the pain I helped to cause. All in all. I just want to say I’m sorry.”

Now, what would pity look like here? Conversely, what would compassion look like? Moreover, how do you think Christ would respond? Better yet, how do you think Christ would encourage us to respond?

Well, here’s how Hisham and Al Salam responded: After receiving the letter, Hisham and the entire leadership team at the mosque went directly to the prosecutor’s office and urged for mercy. For leniency. Like Pharaoh’s daughter looking upon baby Moses adrift and alone, sentenced to cruelty, Hisham and Al Salam took compassion and got directly involved to help change the course of Abraham’s history. They did not just spectate as the system took its course. Nor did they advocate for equitable punishment. Instead, they did something remarkable. Something, dare I say, Christ-like. They expressed compassion for Abraham. And in the end, their merciful efforts proved powerful enough to help grant his early release from prison.

Abraham, upon being freed, wrote: “I want to say thank you to all those who been supporting me and a big thank you to the guys at the mosque who have been so supportive and helpful. I pray blessings over them.”

Hisham’s son, Wasim, immediately responded saying: “Bro, we forgave you from the first time you apologized. Don’t let that mistake bring you down. I speak for the whole Muslim community of Fort Smith... we love you, and want you to be the best example in life. We don’t hold grudges against anybody!”

Only compassion.<sup>1</sup>

Compassion.

My friends, compassion. This is what it looks like. This is what it can do!

May we then, especially in these turbulent times, embody this compassion. May we seek to become more personally involved, leaving these pews not as mere spectators, but inspiring real differences in the lives and communities around us, both near and far. In Texas. In Calgary. In Philadelphia. In all places besieged by war and calamity. In all people who have been silenced and erased. In all hearts shrouded by darkness and distress, especially those in such desperate need of astonishing light.

Precisely that light, that as Christ’s disciples we were called to be.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Disclaimer: I think this story works because 1) Abraham is young and was woefully ignorant at the time of his crime; 2) that he exhibited swift and authentic contrition; and 3) that he was determined to change his stance for the betterment of all involved, especially himself. I do not believe that compassion is always possible in each and every case, especially in cases where points 1, 2, or 3 do not apply. I am unsure if I myself would be open to such a remarkable expression of compassion if the perpetrator was an unsympathetic, unapologetic, religious bigot or violent offender. I believe Jesus is clear in his ministry that forgiveness of others, and especially of sinners (a group to which we all belong), is chief amongst his concerns. But I also witness Jesus condemn hypocrisy and tyranny against those who are less fortunate, or who are on the margins, from those who sit in seats of notoriety and power. All this to say, that while I am of the mind that compassion and love *can be* one of our greatest weapons against hate, I am yet unwilling to author a blanket statement of advice that we all must forgive and be compassionate to each and every person in our lives, no matter the ills they have worked against us. Someone like Joe Arpaio, for instance, who has shown no remorse for his crimes, nor his inhumane treatment of minorities, nor his willful blindness to acts of sexual violence committed against the young, would be hard pressed to earn my compassion. For whatever that is worth.