

You know how some movies have ratings to warn viewers of uncomfortable material, or how some radio broadcasts will say before beginning a news story, “This story has some difficult descriptions.” I considered offering that warning for this morning, for the story I tell might make some of us uncomfortable.

This week I read a story by Cameron Trimble, a UCC pastor who visited a place that made her feel uncomfortable, and I share with you some of her experience:

I joined an international group of ecumenical faith leaders in a small town in the southern part of coastal Thailand. On that trip, needing to get some fresh air one evening, I found myself accidentally on a street called “Walking Street.” I now know that Walking Street is famous as the place young girls are trafficked. I was overwhelmed by blaring neon lights and surrounded by young girls with short dresses lined up on each side of the street. I could not believe what I was seeing. The scale of it was extraordinary, and I continued walking hoping to find my way out...¹

She then described in graphic detail, too intense for me to describe this morning, the trafficking of young girls that she witnessed. That experience created a crisis for her, for she decided it was not ok to live in a

world where this could happen. She came back and spoke with her local church, and soon they connected with a nonprofit organization that works to help those caught in trafficking.

One doesn’t have to travel to the other side of the globe to witness disturbing events, for they exist outside our own doors. You can probably name situations that tear apart the fabric of our community, possibly wondering why not enough lower income housing exists in our area, resulting in numerous people having to live on the streets. Or maybe you’ve wondered what to do about the racial tensions that exist in our nation and our community.

When we encounter these issues, we may wonder what to do, and in Mark’s story of Jesus’ encounter with those in need, we discover Jesus offering a mixture of compassion and rest. Jesus had just given his disciples instructions about how to go into villages to bring hope, suggesting that they shake the dust from their feet if no one wants to listen to them. They then learned of the gruesome death of John the Baptizer, and in the midst of that sorrow, Jesus invited them to a place of rest, a chance to find some down time for themselves. The narrator tells us that

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“Many people were coming and going, so there was no time to eat.” Before they even had a chance to rest, crowds arrived, seeking Jesus, and he had “compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

The word *compassion* is composed of the Latin word *passio*, which means “suffering,” and the prefix *com*, meaning “with.” Compassion means “suffering with,” to experience the suffering with another person, to feel connected to the struggles that another person experiences.

It’s interesting to look at the Greek word for compassion, **σπλαγγνίζομαι** (splangk·nid·zom·ahee). Not only does it have a strange pronunciation, but it also has an even more graphic meaning: to be moved to one’s bowels. One writer explained the meaning of this word, “It means to be moved by something so strongly that you feel it deep in your stomach, deep in your bowels, deep in your guts. Jesus has a sympathetic awareness of the distress of people around him, combined with a strong desire to alleviate it. He feels compassion not just in his heart, but in his guts.”²

Have you ever felt something so deeply that you sensed it in your guts, way down deep inside? Such a feel may lead you to want to do something, and in response, you may be motivated into action.

But eventually you’ll need to rest, and in Mark’s Gospel, the disciples longed to get away. They suggested Jesus send the crowds away to get food, but instead Jesus fed them with five loaves of bread and two fish. After offering compassion to the crowds of people, Jesus offered compassionate rest to his disciples by sending them in a boat to the other side of the lake, while Jesus got away for some private prayer himself.

It’s sometimes hard to face all the trauma in our world, and psychologist Paul Slovic began studying our reactions when faced with the overwhelming statistic of death and suffering.

In one study, his researchers showed people a picture of a 7-year-old girl dying of starvation and asked for donations to help her. He showed another group two starving children, then even larger sets of children. Slovic found people’s distress didn’t grow with the number of children in danger, but often shrank.

“In fact, the more who die, sometimes the less we care,” Slovic said in an interview. In greater numbers, death becomes impersonal, and people feel increasingly hopeless that their actions can have any effect.³

Sometimes we get overwhelmed with all the suffering around us, and we may not see individual cases nearby, as so well illustrated in

an old Portuguese story [about] a young Christian lad who is forced to beg on the streets of his village. One day the beggar boy is scorned and teased by [someone who doesn't believe in God]. “If God really loves you, why doesn't he take better care of you? Why doesn't he tell someone to send you a pair of shoes?”

Sadly, the lad replies, “I think God does tell people, but they aren't listening.”⁴

Jesus invites us to listen, and somehow, he seemed able to respond with compassion to everyone who approached him, though you and I may feel

overwhelmed at such a task. Jesus also knew the limits of the abilities of his disciples, so in addition to offering compassion to the crowds, he offered compassionate rest to his disciples, knowing they needed time to recover and process all that was happening around them. I think Jesus continues to offer that to us today: the challenge to listen and offer compassion to others while also taking compassionate rest for ourselves. You may not be able to bring healing to everyone, but you can probably offer compassion to someone you know. As writer Madeleine L'Engle wrote in one of her books, “Compassion is nothing one feels with the intellect alone. Compassion is particular; it is never general.”⁵

Where's that particular place you can offer compassion? After connecting to the suffering of another, remember to also offer yourself compassionate rest.

¹<https://convergenceus.org/2021/07/15/growing-new-connections-to-create-a-just-world/>

² www.HomileticsOnline.com, July 18, 2021.

³ William Wan and Brittany Shammass, “Why Americans are numb to the staggering coronavirus death toll,” December 21, 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/12/21/covid-why-we-ignore-deaths/

⁴ Hodgin, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #182.

⁵ Madeleine L'Engle, *A Circle of Quiet* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1972), 193.