

**“Moving Into Your Comfort Zone”**

**2 Corinthians 1:3-11**

*Sermon Series: New Year, New You Part 3: Live For Others Week 2: Compassion*

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There are times when a pastor doesn't know what to say.

She looked fragile and nervous when she took the chair in my office. We made the usual chit chat, talking about this and that. Then we talked about “it.” “I’m pregnant,” she whispered. Her eyes looked down at her shoes, her heart was up in her throat. “My boyfriend wants me to have an abortion.” Then looking at me she asked, “What do you think I should do?”

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It was a quiet afternoon and I was alone in the church when he appeared at my door. He introduced himself and my heart froze. Though I'd never seen his face before, I knew him. His wife attended the Bible study I led. She described him as harsh and verbally abusive. She hinted that he might be dangerous. “You the pastor?” he asked. “Yes, one of them.” “My wife comes here. Can I talk to you?” “Sure,” I said, hoping my voice did not betray any worry. “Sit down. What can I do for you?” “I’m here because I don’t want to lose my wife. Can you help me?”

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They opened the large double doors and admitted me to the only part of the hospital that's locked. Inside I saw her in a light blue running suit. Her mood was a deeper blue. “How are you?” I asked, taking the seat next to her on the functional couch in the dayroom of the psychiatric floor. Patients roamed about or stared at the TV. Tears dampened her eyes. “I can't stop crying. I got so down that I couldn't stand it anymore. So I took the pills and laid down on our bed – the one my husband and I picked out together. Then I woke up here.” Wiping the moisture from her cheeks she turned and asked, “What's going to happen to me?”

What would you say to these three? Perhaps you think pastors have all the answers. But I'm frequently speechless. Christianity does not guarantee a life free of suffering. In fact, the New Testament says the opposite. Those who follow Jesus will face more tribulation, not less. That was true in the first century and it is still true for many of our brothers and sisters around the world today. They are dying and watching their children die because they believe in Jesus. Christianity does not offer pat answers for your problems. It does not promise suffering will go away.

What God gives, in large doses, is comfort. One Sunday after church, Mom asked her young daughter what she learned in Sunday school. Jenny answered, “The teacher taught this Bible verse: ‘Don't be scared, your quilt is in the mail.’” A bit perplexed, Mom asked the Sunday school teacher what she taught. “Oh,” said the teacher, “our memory verse was, ‘Be not afraid, your Comforter is coming.’”

Our Lord is a God of comfort and He's not coming by mail or any other means. He's already here. Paul writes,

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

The word "comfort" appears four times in those two verses. If Paul submitted that essay to Miss Benz, my spinster English teacher who scared the semi-colons out of me, she'd say, "You have too many 'comforts' in there. Cut out three." Yet Paul drives home this truth: one of God's greatest gifts is comfort. It comes straight from our Father's heart.

Watch the two words Paul uses to describe the Lord: Father of *compassion* and God of all *comfort*. Compassion is more than pity, more than simply feeling sorry for someone. It literally means to *feel with someone*, to share their wounds and sorrow, to feel their pain in your gut. When my son Peter was about seven, a splinter pierced his finger. Since he did not want us to remove it, we held him in a death grip and tried to distract him with pictures of planets, spacemen and saxophones. It took four adults. As the surgical procedure began I asked, "What's this?" He replied in an ear piercing voice, "A SAXOPHONE! A SPACEMAN! WHICH PLANET ARE WE ON? YOU'RE KILLING ME!" As his father, I felt sorry for him. As a past splinter sufferer, I identified with his pain. As the person holding a wriggling seven year old, I even felt pain.

But God takes compassion one level deeper. In Jesus, God "bore our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Isaiah 53:4). The jagged splinter of pain, suffering and sin that lodges deep in us also pierced Him on the cross. There is nothing we face, no agony or sorrow, which has not already passed through the body of Jesus. He feels what we feel. That's compassion. If you say to God, "You don't understand how I feel," He'll hold up His scarred hands and say, "Oh yes I do."

He is also the God of all comfort. This is more than the comfort your mother gave when you were sick. When I came down with the flu, my Mom tucked a blanket around me, fluffed the pillow, turned on the TV and served me chicken soup, cinnamon toast and tea. Normally, I hate tea. But to this day, when I spike a temperature, I head straight for Lipton's orange pekoe. Mom's comfort is wonderful.

God's comfort is even better. The word "comfort" in this passage describes someone standing beside you. What's so great about that? Years ago Stephen King departed from his usual tales of horror to write a coming of age story about four misfit boys. These guys set off through the woods to find the missing body of a schoolmate who was hit and killed by a train. Along the way, the four confront their fears, differences, weaknesses and the terrible reality of death. Stephen King titled the story, The Body. But the story isn't about a dead body. It reveals how we need each other when facing the joys and terrors of life. So when it came out as a movie what did they call it? Stand By Me. What do I need? Someone to stand by me. Unfortunately, your mother, father, spouse, kids or friends will not always be there to stand by you.

But God can. And God will. That's why Jesus calls the Holy Spirit: "The Comforter" – the One who stands by you when you face your fears, weaknesses, temptations and even the terrible reality of death. Normally, I try to nudge or push you out of your comfort zone. That's how we grow. But today, I want to help you move into your comfort zone, to have God's comfort in your life and relationships. How?

**Believe You Have God's Treasure Inside.** Paul tells the Corinthians:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. (2 Corinthians 4:7-10)

Here Paul goes into detail about the things which disturb his comfort. The world presses, perplexes, persecutes and pushes him down. He probably feels like a limp balloon. The only way to withstand pressure applied on the outside is to push against it with a stronger power on the inside. This all-surpassing power comes not from us but from God. It's His treasure. How much does God love you? He put His treasure inside you. The treasure God puts inside your clay jar is the death of His Son and the risen life of His Son. Jesus died to take away your guilt. Jesus rose to overcome your shame.

Though often confused, there is a great difference between guilt and shame. Guilt means "I made a mistake." Shame means "I am a mistake." Guilt is not bad. When I do something wrong, it's right for me to feel guilty. God placed guilt in me to drive me to seek forgiveness and to make changes so I don't do it again. Guilt is only bad when I wallow in it like a pig in slop. Shame is a deeper issue. It attacks my identity, who I am. Shame is the enemy inside your soul, it's the foe weakening your defenses from within.

Shame says, "You're awful." God says, "You awe-filled."

Shame says, "You're a loser." God says, "You're my loved one."

Shame says, "You're a disaster." God says, "You're my delight."

Shame says, "You're worthless." God says, "You are worthy."

Shame says, "You'll never change." God says, "You're a new creation."

That's why He put His precious treasure in you. The death of His Son takes away your guilt. The life of His Son overcomes your shame and makes you a new creation – precious and treasured in His eyes. It's the all-surpassing power on the inside that pushes out against the pressures of the world. This is where your comfort begins. Believe it.

Next, **Receive His Comfort from Others.** Listen to the anguish that pours out from Paul's soul.

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. (2 Corinthians 1:8-9).

We discussed anxiety, self-pity, depression, bitterness, rage during the emotional pillar in the second part of this series. These become overwhelming when you refuse help, when you rely on your strength alone. Paul says,

This happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. (2 Corinthians 1:9-11)

Don't be a stoic. Let others care for you. Let God comfort you through others. If you are recovering from surgery or just had a baby, let the Deacon's Helping Hands provide a meal for you, a ride for you, a repair for you. If you are grieving the loss of a loved one, let GriefShare help you walk from mourning into hope. If you are struggling, let your Growth Group rally around you. Seek the help of a pastor or counselor.

Woodside is a very caring congregation. Yet my desire is help us be even more comforting. So we've started two more caring ministries which will **Relieve Suffering with His Comfort**. Paul says,

The God of all comfort ... comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

God's comfort is never supposed to stop with you. In my ministry I've known people who gather comforters around them. They soak up all the pity you are willing to give. But they are a bottomless pit of pity, a black hole of need. That's unhealthy for them and you.

In our preparations for the Holy Land trip this summer I shared with the travel group about the geography of the Bible lands. The Jordan flows into the Sea of Galilee where Jesus spent most of His ministry. It's filled with freshwater, teeming with an abundance of fish, and able to irrigate the villages around it. Then the Jordan flows out and down the length of the country until it reaches the Dead Sea - the lowest place on the face of the earth. Everything flows in and nothing flows out. The high concentration of salt makes it fun to bob on the surface like a cork. But it's also dead. Nothing can live in it. The Dead Sea is dead because it keeps everything to itself.

According to Paul, God's comfort always comes to us on the way to someone else. The image Paul uses is not a bottomless pit but a waterfall.

For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if

we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. (2 Corinthians 1:5-6)

When suffering rains down on you, so also Christ's comfort overflows to you, and then through you, to others.

Time and again, the Christians I see who are best at comforting others as those who've already endured struggles with God's comfort. You may say, "I can't do that. That's way beyond my comfort zone." Remember the first three stories I told: a single woman with an unwanted pregnancy, a distraught and possibly dangerous husband, and a mother who made a suicide attempt? I ministered to them. But I was not the one who comforted them most. Three members of my former church walked beside them and offered God's comfort and compassion. They were not professional counselors. Yet at some point in their lives God comforted them and then called them to step out of their comfort zone and help another struggling soul to step into God's comfort zone.

Today we commission two new ministries which will expand the compassion and care of Woodside. First the R.E.A.C.H. team. It stands for Relationships, Empathy And Christ's Healing. They were trained how to make visits, how to be good listeners, how to keep things confidential. They do not counsel, give advice or run errands. They visit, sit beside you, and provide the compassion of the Holy Spirit. They care. Christ cures. They go with me to hospital rooms and homes. Eventually they will reach out and make these caring visits on their own. If I offer you the compassionate care of a REACH minister, don't refuse it. Receive it. Let them help relieve your burdens.

The other Caring ministry we commission today is Hope For All Cancer Care. Led by Director of Ministry Michelle Thompkins and Sara Hiller, Hope For All is for all those traveling on the difficult journey of cancer and their caregivers. I'll let them share with you about their ministry.

#### Video

Contact us if you would like a visit from the REACH team or Hope for All. My hope is that every person in the Woodside community will receive the care and compassion of Jesus. Erma Bombeck learned that even in our interactive world of high speed communication, we still need to pause and listen.

It was one of those days when I wanted my own apartment – unlisted. My son was telling me, in complete detail, about a movie he had just seen, punctuated by 3000 "You knows?" My teeth were falling asleep. There were three phone calls – strike that – three monologues that could have been answered by a recording. I fought the urge to say, "It's been nice listening to you." And later, in the cab from home to the airport, I got another assault on my ear, this time by a cabdriver rambling on about his son in college.

At last there were 30 whole beautiful minutes before my plane took off – time for me to be alone with my own thoughts, to open a book and let my mind wander.

A voice next to me belonging to an elderly woman said, “I’ll bet it’s cold in Chicago.” Stone faced, I replied, “It’s likely.”

“I haven’t been to Chicago in nearly three years,” she persisted. “My son lives there.” “That’s nice,” I said, my eyes intent on my book.

“My husband’s body is on this plane. We’ve been married for 53 years. I don’t drive, you know, and when he died a nun drove me home from the hospital. We aren’t even Catholic. The funeral director let me come to the airport with him.”

I don’t think I have ever detested myself more than I did at that moment. Another human being was screaming to be heard and, in desperation, had turned to a cold stranger who was more interested in a novel than in the real-life drama at her elbow. She needed no advice, money, assistance or expertise – all she needed was someone to listen.

She talked numbly and steadily until we boarded the plane, then found her seat in another section. As I hung up my coat, I heard her plaintive voice say to her seat companion, “I’ll bet it’s cold in Chicago.” I prayed, “Please, God, let her listen.”<sup>1</sup>

That’s my prayer for all of us: Please, God, let us listen.

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<sup>1</sup> Erma Bombeck, “Please, Listen!”, The Chicago Sun-Times, c. 1977.