

*Title: Moved with Compassion: The Spiritual Practice of Serving*

3/1 Sermon – The Second Sunday in Lent (Year A)

Rev. Lindsey Odom

Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 58:6-12

Reading from the New Testament: Mark 1:40-45

Last week, Sandy read a quote by John Mark Comer, which says, “if you want to experience the life of Jesus, you have to adopt the lifestyle of Jesus,” in his sermon on spiritual practices. This quote reminds us that our faith is not only something we believe in, but something we practice with our lives every single day.

One week during Big Youth Group, our youth played a simple game of charades. They acted out ordinary things such as brushing their teeth, doing homework, scrolling on their phones, walking the dog, unloading the dishwasher, and making their beds. And we guessed each one almost instantly, not because the acting was so good, but because these movements are so familiar to us. They are the kinds of things we do every day without even thinking about them. After the game of charades, I asked the youth: why do these things feel so natural? And they said, “because we do them every day.” They have become habits for our youth and for us, practices so ordinary we almost forget we are choosing them. And that led us to something deeper:

*What if our faith is meant to work the same way?*

The truth is, all of us already understand how practices shape us because we live by them through the small, daily repeated rhythms of waking up, getting dressed, brushing our teeth, showing up to work or school, preparing meals, and tending to responsibilities that, over time, form who we are without us even noticing. None of these actions are grand gestures, but every single one of them shapes our lives. Spiritual practices work the same way because they are how Christ is formed in us.

Theologian Dallas Willard writes: “Spiritual disciplines are activities within our power that enable us to accomplish what we cannot do by our own direct effort.” In other words we cannot force ourselves to become like Christ instantly, but we can practice the kinds of

actions that shape us into people who love and live like Christ did. We practice and live out our faith so that God's love can take root in us, so that, over time, it becomes natural.

That is exactly what we see in our gospel reading today from the Gospel of Mark, Mark 1:40–45 when a man with leprosy approaches Jesus. Leprosy in scripture refers to a range of skin diseases, and this man has been unclean for some time and is therefore isolated from normal society. Lepers were taught to keep their distance, to stay on the margins, and to avoid contact with others. Yet he kneels before Jesus and speaks words that are both humble and bold in verse 40. He says, "*If you are willing, you can make me clean.*" The request is not only for healing, but to be declared clean and restored to community again. When the man says this, Mark tells us that Jesus is "moved." Jesus does not hesitate. Jesus reaches out and touches him.

Most Greek translations describe Jesus as "filled with compassion," using one of the strongest words for compassion in the New Testament – *splagchnistheis*, which is a word that suggests a deep, visceral response from the very core of one's being. The word is derived from *splagchna*, which refers to the "inward parts" or "entrails" from our heart, liver, lungs, and kidneys. It has a visceral, intense meaning. It does not describe polite concern or distant sympathy. It literally refers to the gut, the bowels, the place where deep emotion lives. The form of the verb, means "to have the bowels yearn" and to be moved in one's bowels/ gut, the depths of one's being. It connotes a physical reaction, and anticipates a compassionate and practical response – a deep, visceral feeling of love, pity, or empathy type of response. So, it is not a polite concern or distant sympathy. It is a compassion that is felt and acted upon. And out of that deep compassion, Jesus reaches out his hand, touches the man, and heals him.

Before the healing even occurs, Jesus closes the distance. Jesus crosses every social and religious boundary and speaks words of restoration in verse 41 when he says: *I am willing. Be made clean.* Immediately, the healing takes place. But Jesus does not stop there. He sends the man to the priest so his restoration can be publicly recognized. And instead of quietly

returning to life, the man shares his story everywhere, and people begin to come to Jesus from all directions. Compassion multiplies. One act becomes a movement of hope.

This shows us that compassion is not just something Jesus feels; rather, it's something Jesus does. Jesus refuses to leave the world unchanged, where people were pushed to the margins or cut off from community. His compassion confronts what is broken and restores what is lost. When we bring our pain, our fear, and our longings, God does not recoil; God reaches out with a compassion that heals and transforms us, often in ways we do not expect.

So, our gospel story does not stop with what God in Christ does for us. If compassion is Jesus' posture toward the world, and if we claim to follow Christ, then compassion cannot be optional for us. It becomes a spiritual practice, a way of life that shapes us over time. In our Lenten sermon series, "Living the Life," we will be learning about practices like prayer, Sabbath, discernment, and silence that draw us closer to God and to each other. Compassion and service belong in the same category. Because when we intentionally move toward others in love, we are not just helping; rather, we are being formed and shaped.

Ethicist Marcus Mescher describes compassion as the courage to move toward what frightens us, including pain, brokenness, and suffering we might rather avoid. True compassion is not pity from a distance; it is a willingness to "suffer with," to let another's reality disrupt our comfort. It requires awareness, care strong enough to matter, and commitment deep enough to act. This kind of solidarity has the power to heal both personal wounds and social divisions. That is exactly the compassion Jesus models, restoring the man not only to health, but to community.

Now think back to those ordinary routines we talked about at the beginning of this sermon. Every morning we wake up. We get dressed. We prepare for the day. Our routines assume belonging. They assume we will be seen and viewed as human. But the leper would have woken up to a very different routine. He still had to step into the day knowing that when people saw him, they would move away. His isolation was not a single moment; rather, it was built into the rhythm of his everyday life.

And that is where this gospel story presses us. Because we, too, live by routines, whether they are personal ones, congregational ones, or societal ones. And sometimes, without even intending to, those routines determine who is welcomed easily, and who must fight to be seen or fight to have a spot at the table. So the question this passage raises is not only what Jesus did back then, but what we are practicing now:

*Who do we make the lepers of today and why?*

*Who is kept at a distance through our systems, our assumptions, or our silence?*

*Who wakes up each morning already knowing they may be ignored, avoided, or judged?*

The hard truth is that exclusion can become habitual. We can grow so used to keeping certain people at the margins that we stop noticing we are doing it at all. But the good news of this story is that compassion and service can also become a habit, a daily way of life. You might recall times when members of this church did not just provide help, but built relationships by learning names, sharing meals, and listening to stories, discovering that compassion changes everyone involved. That is what happens when compassion becomes a spiritual practice.

Jesus' touch in our gospel story was not an isolated act of kindness. It was the overflow of a life that had practiced moving toward people, not away from them. To serve with compassion is to close distance and walk alongside others, especially in their greatest time of need. Service is not just something we do as it forms who we are becoming in the person and likeness of Christ.

So, every time we show up to serve, we are practicing seeing Christ in another person, loosening the grip of our own comfort and privilege, learning to love across differences, and trusting that God meets us there. Service, then, is not an interruption to our spiritual lives; it is one of the primary places our spiritual lives are shaped and deepened.

Here at SMPC, this spiritual practice of service is woven into the fabric of who we are. We embody compassion through ministries that feed neighbors, walk alongside those experiencing hardship, grief, and loss, build relationships across our community, support mission partners, and create opportunities for every generation to serve. These are not just

volunteer opportunities; rather, they are invitations into transformation. They are spaces where we learn to move toward someone with compassion, like Jesus did, rather than away.

So today, I invite each of you to stop by the tables in the narthex and learn more about ways our church serves, and possibly commit to an act of service, or to serving on our Missions and Outreach committee. As you see all the possibilities, I encourage you to listen for the Holy Spirit's whisper. Which one of the various mission opportunities is God nudging you to try? Don't worry, there are lots of one-off service options at our church. I am not asking you to sign your life away. But this Lent, as we focus on the practices of the spiritual life, I encourage you to dip your toe into one new spiritual practice, for all of us and for our community and world, as service gets woven more and more into the pattern of our everyday lives and routines.

That is the invitation before us, not to add one more thing to our schedules, but to allow the ordinary rhythms of our lives to become places where Christ forms us and shapes us. It is Christ' hope for us to let compassion become something we practice until it becomes something we naturally live out. This is because the life of faith is not built in a single dramatic moment; rather, it is formed, day by day, in the quiet decision to draw near, to notice, to care, to show compassion, to serve others, and to follow Jesus in the way of love.

So, how are you going to serve? Amen.