



Sermon, October 4, 2020  
Rev. Dr. Craig S. Pesti-Strobel  
Junction City United Methodist Church

## Sermon Series: Jesus's Way of Ways

### "The Way of Acts of Charity"



#### **Scripture: (Matthew 6:1-4)**

6 "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

2 "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

#### **Second Reading (1 John 4:7-12)**

7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

**Every human society has come into existence as a result of the cooperation of humans with one another. This has meant that people contribute their talents, abilities and even material substance towards the security and sustenance of the group or society as a whole. But every**

society has also had to reckon with the fact that not everybody is able to contribute equally, and that some members of its group are more vulnerable than others, whether because of their age, or because of disability, injury or disease. The giving of alms arose in societies around the world as a means for those on the margins of society to survive. When Jesus speaks about giving alms in the Sermon on the mount, he is presupposing the fact that almsgiving was already part of Jewish piety and practice. He doesn't need to make a case for it. There is evidence that the group of disciples who traveled with Jesus not only received monetary support from others, but also maintained their own fund for giving to the poor.

But there were other forms of charity as well. "Charity" is from the Latin, *caritas*, which means "love for all people." Jesus' ministry was characterized by his compassion for all the people with whom he came in contact. He helped people in whatever way he could to find greater purpose or hope, to be physically made well, and to be restored to their family and friends. He engaged in a ministry of healing, teaching and casting out demons that drew throngs of people everywhere he went.

This work of charity, or love for all people, was rooted in compassion. "As he landed, he saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 6:34). The Greek word we translate as "having compassion" is vivid: it literally means to be moved deeply within one's gut. Compassion was not an intellectual concept to Jesus, it was a direct, visceral experience that was the result of meeting people face-to-face and being open to their needs and struggles in life. He literally felt their pain and desperation, and responded out of the resources he possessed, either materially or emotionally and spiritually. Matthew summarizes his activities this way: "...many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 'He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases'" (Matthew 8:17 NIV).

Works of charity that are based in compassion are the manifestation of God's presence in the world. This is because, as the writer of 1 John proclaims, "God is love" (1 John 4:8). The writer of the Gospel of John declares that it was because of God's great love for the world that Jesus was sent into the world, to manifest and actualize that love in specific, concrete ways. All acts of charity that arise out of human compassion for others are rooted, therefore, in the nature of God, and are ways that the "Love of God" moves from being a concept to being a living reality.

The *caritas* that is based in the Path of Jesus is not about finding people who are "worse off than us," nor is it the attitude of "there but for the grace of God go I." The *caritas* of Jesus is we meet Jesus in whomever we serve. And that is important to understand – we are serving others. Any act of reaching out in compassion is an act of discovering Jesus embodied in the other. In fact, what happens in this act is that we discover that when we love our neighbor as ourselves – we are literally expanding our sense of self to include the other. Our neighbor – this person we are engaged with – is a part of our own selves. We are included as part of their self, and they are part of ours. Every act of charity, of kindness, of assistance, of advocacy for others actually affects the whole of humankind, because we are all connected, we all share in one garment of destiny. Each choice we make everyday weaves the world we will awaken to tomorrow.

A number of years ago a movie came out that had a profound effect upon how we think about this notion of helping one another. It was called *Pay It Forward*, based on the book by Catherine Ryan Hyde. Perhaps you remember it. Reuben St. Clair, the teacher protagonist of the book (and movie) *Pay It Forward*, starts a movement with this voluntary, extra-credit assignment: THINK OF AN IDEA FOR WORLD CHANGE, AND PUT IT INTO ACTION.

Trevor, the 12-year-old hero of *Pay It Forward*, thinks of quite an idea. He describes it to his mother and teacher this way: "You see, I do

something real good for three people. And then when they ask how they can pay it back, I say they have to Pay It Forward. To three more people. Each. So nine people get helped. Then those people have to do twenty-seven." He turned on the calculator, punched in a few numbers. "Then it sort of spreads out, see. To eighty-one. Then two hundred forty-three. Then seven hundred twenty-nine. Then two thousand, one hundred eighty-seven. See how big it gets?"

The Way of Jesus recognizes that the world is not always the way it should be. But it also recognizes that we have made the world the way it is. And since we have made it this way, we can also unmake it and make it to be different.

So, I invite you to try out the Pay It Forward challenge this week (and every week after). What good can you do that will make somebody else's life a little better, or maybe a whole lot better? What would a happier, healthier, and more compassionate world look like – and how might you help it get that way? And how would you do it so that not even your left hand knows that your right hand is doing it?