THE JESUS PRIORITIES: HEAL

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Matthew 15:21-31

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# SETTING THE CONTEXT

Christopher Maricle is a life-long Christian who had a crisis of faith watching people he loved struggle with medical conditions. In that experience, he felt the absence of God and found himself asking questions like “Why is this life, at times, so hard? Why isn’t my faith helping me? Why am I finding no comfort in prayer?” The struggles and the questions challenged all his notions of faith, his perception of God, and the purpose of this life. He decided to seek answers by rediscovering who Jesus was and what he consistently said and did during his public ministry that might be instructive. In his survey of the Gospels, he found some essential traits he called the Jesus priorities.[[1]](#endnote-1)

As I considered the final sermon series I wanted to share with you, I asked myself, “what is it that I most want you to remember?” My desire and goal as your pastor has always been to help you connect to God through Jesus Christ and then encourage you to reflect that relationship into the world. A disciple is a person who not only learns from Jesus, but one who wants to be like him. **Being a disciple, being like Jesus, is demonstrated not only in what we say, but in what we do and how we are as people.** If we believe that Jesus is a true expression of God and that he is the best way for us to know a limitless unfathomable God, understanding who he was and how we can be like him also draws us closer to God. Focusing on Jesus’ priorities is how I want to spend these last two months; focusing on the things he consistently said and did and how we might use that to inform how we live our lives.

**The priorities of Jesus’ life interestingly center about two primary categories both of which are included in his great commandment, “Love God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and love your neighbor.”** (Matthew 22:36-40) Jesus’ habits centered around loving God that we’ll consider are praying and seeking God’s will. As Maricle found, “these priorities reveal the fundamental habits of thought and the elements of personal faith essential for life in God.” The habits centered around loving our neighbor that we’ll consider are healing, loving, spreading the word, accepting children as precious and living with humility. Maricle said, these priorities “provide guidance on essential habits for Christian life as it is lived in action, giving clear direction on how to treat all people, all neighbors.”[[2]](#endnote-2) **The ratio is 3 to 1: three habits related to others for every one habit related to loving God.** I think that is an indication of how hard it is for us to practice loving others and a confirmation from Jesus about how important it is to practice our faith through our attitudes and behavior towards others. Jesus demonstrates that we cannot truly love God without loving our neighbors.

**A substantial portion of what Jesus said and did during his public ministry centered around three things, healing, love, and prayer.** Today we’re going to focus in on healing. **Jesus healed people more than any other action he took in the Gospels.** Jesus consistently healed others. Today’s Scripture tells of one of the few times where he healed someone with some initial reluctance. A little background information is necessary to understand his uncharacteristic harshness in this story about the Canaanite woman.

The hostility between the Jewish people and the Canaanites goes way back into their history when the Hebrew tribes conquered the Promised Land, which was the land of the Canaanites. That hostility was rooted even deeper centuries later when the priest Ezra, had everyone who had intermarried with the Canaanites give up their foreign spouses and children. This was done to protect them from idolatry, turning away from the God of Israel to the Canaanite gods. By the time of Jesus, the hostility between the Jews and the Canaanites was deeply ingrained. The cities of Tyre and Sīdon were well north of Galilee in the land of Syria and Phoenicia.

Read Matthew 15:21-31

# THE SERMON

Jesus’ reputation as a healer spread across the region of Galilee. He healed a lot of people during his public ministry. Our story today shows him healing someone he would never have expected to help. He broke a very deep and strong boundary because of her faith in him and the power God gave him. It’s not like he set up clinics to do his healing, it seems that it was a natural part of his life; he just did it when it was called for. **By looking at the healing stories of Jesus’, we can find four principles that we can adopt in our own lives, 1) compassion, 2) saying yes to strangers, 3) doing what is in our power to do, and 4) seeing with the heart.**[[3]](#endnote-3)

If I was to identify a central characteristic of Jesus, the engine of his healing work it would be compassion. **Compassion was central to his daily life because I believe it is a core characteristic of God.** No matter what was going on around him, even at the passion events we just relived during Lent and Holy Week, he never lost his compassion. **The best way for us to reflect him in and through our lives is to be compassionate as he was compassionate.** I’m not sure any of us can miraculously heal another, but with compassion we can be a healing presence for those who are hurting. Compassion can lead us to the best ways to respond to someone else’s “bad news”. My oldest son and his wife are being introduced to their second foster child this week. Their calling to become foster parents came out of experiences with their daughter’s friend and from their compassion for children and especially teens who are struggling. Jesus integrated activities that flowed directly from his values into his daily routine. **What conscious and unconscious values drive us toward compassionate action for some and inaction toward others? How can we incorporate being a healing presence into our daily encounters?**

**Secondly, Jesus said yes to strangers.** The majority of people Jesus healed were strangers to him. **In fact, he healed strangers as readily as his friends.** The Canaanite woman was not just a stranger, she was an adversary. She was of another nation, an enemy nation. Occasionally when I do international mission work, I hear people say, “we need to take care of our own first.” My response to that is we need to take care of our own ***and*** people from other countries. There are no national boundaries to who belongs to the family of Christ, all are created and loved by God. We are one family in Christ Jesus. Compassion isn’t just for our friends, its for everyone. But this leads to the next point.

**Thirdly, we do what is within our power to do**. **Maybe we can’t cure a disease and we can’t do everything, but we can contribute blood, or cook a meal, or send a card or use our career for healing work and that means not only the helping professions, but also from a waiter to a CEO who uses his or her job as a platform to encounter others compassionately.** There are thousands of ways we can be compassionate. One of the things I love about our church is that we provide an incredible variety of ways to be a healing presence in the lives of people within our community and in the lives of strangers outside of our community. We may never meet a veteran or an inmate who enjoyed the books and magazines that we’ve been donating for years to the Veteran’s Hospital and to the jails, but they can still be a vehicle to say someone cared enough about you to send you this gift. **Healing is more than cure, it’s being included rather than ostracized by the community, it’s coming to peace with the way things are or overcoming the way things are.** Maricle struggled with the meaning of healing especially having his loved ones with serious medical conditions. He said the fundamental truth he has come to is that God created the world for love because that is God’s nature. He went on, “life is the stage upon which each of us responds to the life-events that are beyond our power by choosing between love and indifference. Both are within our power.”[[4]](#endnote-4) We can always respond in love with compassion.

**This leads us to the final principle we can adopt in our lives; we can increase our awareness of others’ needs by looking with the intent not to judge, but to empathize.** It brings us full circle, leading us to compassion. Sometimes I really struggle with this especially with those folks with signs on the roadside. I have to remind myself that people’s lives are complex and rarely do we know the full story. I don’t know any of the story of those on the roadside. My area to grow is to look at them with compassion rather than judgment. **Who are you inclined to judge? How can you move away from judgment toward compassion?**

If we want to be like Jesus, cultivating compassion and practicing being a healing presence in the lives of people is a great way to begin. **What life experiences help you be compassionate toward specific groups of people? What opportunities will you have this week to be a healing presence to friend and stranger alike?** When Jesus healed all those folks in Galilee, they praised the God of Israel. May we lead others to praise God through our lives. Amen.

1. Christopher Maricle. *The Jesus Priorities: 8 Essential Habits*. (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2007) p. 11-14. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Maricle, p. 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Maricle, p. 23-33. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Maricle, p. 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)