

Looking up to God by Reaching Down.

Looking up to God by reaching down is the title I have chosen for today's homily. Many people pray by looking up to heaven. There is nothing wrong with this. However, we often fail to realize that our God is all around us and to see him we may well have to reach down with compassion.

How do we do this? To start we need to define the word compassion.

In his bestselling book, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, Father Gregory Boyle defines for us what it means to live a life based on the idea of Christian compassion.

Father Greg is a man who has dedicated his life to those many in society consider to be disposable and without worth. He lives among and works with gang members in the heart of Los Angeles, California.

Fr. Greg or G-Dog as his young friends in the projects call him, was teaching a class in a maximum security prison. He noticed that his students, 15 men doing life sentences, used the words sympathy, empathy and compassion interchangeably. He decided to ask them to define each of these terms.

One lifer jumped into the conversation immediately and offered that sympathy was when your friend's mom dies and you visit him saying; "Spenser sorry to hear about your moms."

A second member of the class offered a definition for empathy. He told the group that empathy is going to your friend whose Mom has just died and putting your arm around him consoling him with words like; "Spenser sorry to hear about your Moms, my Moms died 6 months ago- I feel your pain bro."

Then there was silence. Nobody wanted to take a crack at defining compassion. After a few awkward moments of quiet one of the guys, a lifer down 25 years spoke up: "Well now", he said, all eyes on him, shaking his head, "Compassion – that's 'sum-thin' altogether different." He paused and then offered humbly- "Compassion is what Jesus did...God is compassion."

Father Greg writes that compassion was the wallpaper of Jesus Soul- the contour of his heart.

To fully appreciate the depth of our Lord's compassion it is important to understand what it meant to be a person with leprosy in the first century of the modern era.

We get a good sense of this from today's first reading from the Hebrew book of Leviticus.

"The one who bears the sore of leprosy shall keep his garments rent and his head bare, and shall muffle his beard; he shall cry out, 'Unclean, unclean!'"

Once a sore appeared the person afflicted would know life as they knew it was over. They would have to leave their family and the rest of their life would be filled with suffering and unbearable shame.

In the gospel we find Jesus wandering around Galilee. He is likely surrounded by his disciples and those who simply are curious about this itinerant preacher whose fame is growing through the region.

Then a voice calls out:

"Jesus if you wish, you can make me clean."

It is out of Christ's compassion that one of the most compelling scenes in all of the New Testament unfolds before our eyes.

"Moved with "compassion", Jesus stretched out his hand, and touched the man, and said to him, "I do will it. Be made clean."

This person that the entire town considered to be untouchable, unclean and a sinner was cured. The most powerful image in this story takes place at the moment Jesus reached down and touched the man. Christ touched the untouchable and in doing so he made himself "ritually unclean" in the eyes of the religious authorities.

This would have been an unbelievable scene to those watching. The shame-filled man was able to stand tall again. He was free to re-start his life.

Shame is a deadly burden for anyone to carry. It drains the life from the one judged to be untouchable.

The gospel story offers us at least two fundamental lessons.

The first teaching, for most of us anyway, is that there will be times when we will do something we regard as shameful. This can start at a very young age. We find ourselves judged by those around us as unworthy. Many of us are our own harshest critics. We may have come to see ourselves as the one with leprosy.

The gospel challenges us to have the courage and the trust to yell out to Jesus – "Make me clean." The trust comes in believing there is nothing we have ever done that would make us untouchable to Jesus.

Like most of the great stories about the itinerant preacher Jesus, there is a second challenge. The first is placing us in the shoes of the leper. The second test is to take the place of Jesus in the story.

Many of us look up to pray to God. We are convinced that Heaven is up. The reality however is that our God, our brother Jesus is everywhere and one of the best ways to find him is to conquer our fears and need to pre-judge others and to reach down and touch the one others consider to be untouchable.

Father Greg concludes that compassion is about living in the world where God is.

Who in your immediate family or circle of friends has been cast out and branded as the "bad seed"? Most likely they have earned this designation for repeated bad behaviour.

For you young folks, this outcast may be a classmate who is often alone and the subject of jokes and pranks because the group has branded them as weird or different.

Being compassionate to those closest to us is often much harder than extending a helping hand to a complete stranger. One of the reasons for this is that we risk being judged by others as “ritually” unclean- just as the religious authorities would have branded Jesus after he touched the man with leprosy.

We end mass now with the words: Go in peace glorifying the Lord by your life.

We can find peace by calling out to Jesus when we feel shame and need help.

When we are at peace we can glorify the Lord by having the courage to go out into the World where God is and by reaching down and touching our brothers and sisters in need.