

7/18/2021

8 Pentecost 2021

We gather this morning as God's people, inspired by the Spirit ... to witness more effectively, to listen more deeply, to speak more truthfully, to live more peacefully, to love more energetically, to teach more eloquently, to pray more seriously, to worship more enthusiastically, to celebrate more joyfully, to sing more faithfully, to give more generously, to serve more compassionately. Amen!

Many of us can look back at a particular life situation, that demanded our attention, because it seemed to touch our very souls. Maybe we did not know how we should respond, but we knew that we had to do something. Kevin Randall knew this when he was attending a leadership camp.

His story is entitled: The Boy Under the Tree (by: David Coleman and Kevin Randall, {Source Unknown in Compassion, Love})

"In the summer recess between freshman and sophomore years in college, I was invited to be an instructor at a high school leadership camp hosted by a college in Michigan. I was already highly involved in most campus activities, and I jumped at the opportunity. About an hour into the first day of camp, amid the frenzy of icebreakers and forced interactions, I first noticed the boy under the tree. He was small and skinny, and his obvious discomfort and shyness made him appear frail and fragile. Only 50 feet away, 200 eager campers were bumping bodies, playing, joking, and meeting each other, but the boy under the tree seemed to want to be anywhere other than where he was. The desperate loneliness he radiated almost stopped me from approaching him, but I remembered the instructions from the senior staff to stay alert for campers who might feel left out. As I walked toward him, I said, "Hi, my name is Kevin and I'm one of the counselors. It's nice to meet you. How are you?" In a shaky, sheepish voice he reluctantly answered, "Okay, I guess" I calmly asked him if he wanted to join the activities and meet some new people. He quietly replied, "No, this is not really my thing."

I could sense that he was in a new world, that this whole experience was foreign to him. But I somehow knew it wouldn't be right to push him, either. He didn't need a pep talk; he needed a friend. After several silent moments, my first interaction with the boy under the tree was over. At lunch the next day, I found myself leading camp songs at the top of my lungs for 200 of my new friends. The campers were eagerly participated. My gaze wandered over the mass of noise and movement and was caught by the image of the boy from under the tree, sitting alone, staring out the window. I nearly forgot the words to the song I was supposed to be leading. At my first opportunity, I tried again, with the same questions as before: "How are you doing? Are you okay?" To which he again replied, "Yeah, I'm alright. I just don't really get into this stuff." As I left the cafeteria, I too realized this was going to take more time and effort than I had thought — if it was even possible to get through to him at all.

That evening at our nightly staff meeting, I made my concerns about him known. I explained to my fellow staff members my impression of him and asked them to pay special attention and spend time with him when they could. The days I spend at camp each year fly by faster than any others I have known. Thus, before I knew it, mid-week had dissolved into the final night of camp, and I was chaperoning the "last dance." The students were doing all they could to savor every last moment with their new "best friends" — friends they would probably never see again.

As I watched the campers share their parting moments, I suddenly saw what would be one of the most vivid memories of my life. The boy from under the tree, who stared blankly out the kitchen window, was now a shirtless dancing wonder. He owned the dance floor as he and two girls proceeded to cut up a rug. I watched as he shared meaningful, intimate time with people at whom he couldn't even look just days earlier. I couldn't believe it was him. In October of my sophomore year, a late-night phone call pulled me away from my chemistry book. A soft-spoken, unfamiliar voice asked politely, "Is Kevin there?" "You're talking to him. Who's this?"

"This is Tom Johnson's mom. Do you remember Tommy from leadership camp?"

The boy under the tree. How could I not remember? “Yes, I do,” I said. “He’s a very nice young man. How is he?”

An abnormally long pause followed, then Mrs. Johnson said, “My Tommy was walking home from school this week when he was hit by a car and killed.” Shocked, I offered my condolences.

“I just wanted to call you,” she said, “because Tommy mentioned you so many times. I wanted you to know that he went back to school this fall with confidence. He made new friends. His grades went up. And he even went out on a few dates. I just wanted to thank you for making a difference for Tom. The last few months were the best few months of his life.”

In that instant, I realized how easy it is to give a bit of yourself every day. You may never know how much each gesture may mean to someone else. I tell this story as often as I can, and when I do, I urge others to look out for their own “boy under the tree.” End of story. Those of us who have been involved in youth ministry could see how this scenario could play out, many times without us even knowing about it.

Kevin was able to reach out to Tom with compassion and this encounter changed both of their lives. Was that Kevin’s intent? Probably not. Most likely, He just wanted Tom to feel like he belonged and to have a good time at camp.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines compassion as the: “sympathetic consciousness of others' distress, together with a desire to alleviate it.” If you break it down, compassion consists of the Latin word, *passio*, which means suffering or enduring.

The prefix “com” means “with.” In other words, ‘suffering with’.

We should be moved with compassion when we see someone in need or is hurting. It is what compels us to help others. When one is driven by compassion, a great deal of energy is focused on the goal. We feel that energy coming from a place deep within us. Because of the great number of people seeking out Jesus, the disciples in this morning’s Gospel reading

had no time even to eat, let alone rest. So, Jesus tried to get them away from the crowds so they could nourish themselves. However, “As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd”. The crowds followed Jesus wherever He went, some to hear him speak and others for healing. Jesus felt compassion for them from the deepest parts of his very being. And this demanded a response.

Compassion is vital for our lives as Christians. At some point, we must ask the question, are we willing to “suffer with” the hurting people around us?

Over 13 million households experienced food insecurity in 2019, a problem that was made only worse by the pandemic. That is a whole lot of people to have compassion for. So many people, that if we look at the huge number of those affected, it numbs the effect for many of us, and it becomes more difficult to feel compassion. As we focus down on our own communities, we should be affected in some way. When people were hungry, Jesus fed them. People that had little were provided for by those who had plenty. The early Christian communities shared among themselves, so no one was found wanting. As we are all aware, the pandemic brought to the surface many other societal injustices that we as Christians needed to feel compassion for. The bottom line for me is that compassion drives effective ministry.

Several of you know Paul and Michelle Dye. Paul is Mel’s son. For them, going out to see a family who has been traumatized by a home fire, is an act of compassion. Many times, the family is waiting outside their home for someone from the Red Cross to come and help them. It is what Jesus would have done.

Many local congregations have started food pantries, shower facilities for the homeless, opened their buildings during the winter months for those needing a warm place to sleep, staffing shelters, walking the streets of their communities to see what needs are out there. Thanks to Ted, we now have a small food pantry box out front, so folks can take what they need for free. All of these are driven by a compassion for those in need. It is what we do.

It means finding where our compassions lie. Once you have done that, acting on them becomes much easier. The alternative is not having compassion for anyone or anything. This can happen for any number of reasons, especially the business of life. It makes following Jesus much more difficult.

The following poem was written by Sheri Eckert and serves as a great reminder that we should all “Be That One” kind of person who looks to inspire, encourage, and assist others in their journey of life. She wrote:

“Be that one.

That One who forgives when a deep offense has been committed.

That One who loves when no one else does.

That One who shares kindness to those who are mean.

Be That One who looks past the insult, instead, seeing the pain that motivated it.

That One who shines the light upon those who sit in utter darkness.

Because the impact of being ‘That One’ runs far and wide. It brings healing to the wounded, joy to the sad, and hope to those in despair.

Be That One.

Amen!