

2 Corinthians 1:3-7 Compassion Initiative Talk 2 October 21,2017

Big idea: We have comfort in suffering and hope in salvation

Introduction

Well if you've been following the sermon series for the last few weeks, you've heard a lot about compassion.

Did you know that while Christians understand compassion through a Biblical lens, there are scientists interested in how it works in the brain and why we're wired to be compassionate towards others?

Emotion researchers, have defined it in two stages.

The first part is the feeling that comes up when you are confronted with someone else's suffering.

Do you wince when someone stubs their toe? Do you cry in sad movies? Or when someone tells you bad news?

Scientists explain that this happens to most people because we're wired with mirror neurones, which help us understand someone else not by thinking but by feeling.

<http://www.brainfacts.org/brain-basics/neuroanatomy/articles/2008/mirror-neurons/>

The second part is feeling motivated to relieve that suffering for them. To comfort, to hold, to soothe. To help, to support, to carry.

Some research has shown that feelings of compassion cause our heart rates to slow down and for the hormone oxytocin to be released, which probably increases our desire to care for others. And it's good for us too.

Dr Dan Siegel, a psychiatrist and expert in neuroscience and mindfulness, says that 'integration', the linking of different aspects of a system, such as the brain, is at the heart of well-being, resilience, mindfulness and compassion.

Here are four things that neuroscience and neurobiology can teach us about compassion:

1. We can change the brain through changing the mind.

As Siegel explained, the concept of "neural integration" refers to the interaction between various disparate parts of the brain.

2. We can increase our capacity for compassion through integration.

An integrated brain is mindful, present and compassionate.

A study of the electrical signals in the brains of Tibetan monks, found that they were the most integrated, because they spent most of their time meditating and being compassionate. So Dan Siegel thinks that empathy can actually be cultivated by "exercising" the brain with loving kindness meditation.

3. Being mindful can help us become more compassionate.

His research has shown that mindfulness meditation stimulates the growth of integrative fibres in the brain.

"You can build the gateway of empathy and compassion through mindfulness meditation." said Siegel.

And perhaps the most interesting thing:

4. Healthy relationships can boost your brain power.

We can build more integrated brains by having healthy, caring relationships with others. These relationships can make us more mindful and more compassionate.

Siegel says: "*Integrative communication in a relationship stimulates the growth of integrative fibres in the brain.* "

http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/what-neuroscience-can-tea_n_5268853

And as is often the case science attempts to explain the 'how' but God's word is much more interested in the 'why' and the 'who'.

I love it when science confirms or explains something that as Christians we've always known to be true.

That its in healthy relationships, by being in connected, that we have the possibility of mental health and wellbeing, well-being that is characterised in compassion.

Compassion is something we can only really experience in relationship to someone or something else.

It's the 'who'.

We have an incredible capacity for compassion when a connection is created.

And it can be in real time or it can be virtual.

It could be with your grandmother who you've known all your life, whose memory is starting to falter.

Or it could be with someone you've just met with a story of anxiety or depression.

It could be the sad ending of a movie which brings you to tears even it's just Hollywood.

Or it could be the image of poverty and disease being suffered by children you've never met, on the ABC news, which is real and confronting.

And though we've all experienced compassion in different ways, 2 Corinthians 1 shows us that there is a deeper way of understanding it.

That it's not just the relationship with the other that evokes compassion but that it's the relationship with the **source** of compassion that shapes and colours and defines our compassion.

What I'm hoping we'll see is that there is an important relationship between the **source of comfort**, the **work of comfort** and the **purpose of comfort**.

What William Taylor describes as

'Economy of affliction and comfort' (Proclamation Bible)

We'll see how we have ***we have comfort in suffering and hope in salvation*** as we consider:

Outline

The source of comfort

The work of comfort

The purpose of comfort

Context

In many ways Paul could be addressing our culture in this letter. The Corinthians were wealthy, multi-cultural, and the Isthmus Games, which were held every two years made Corinth synonymous with success and achievement.

They worshipped the Greek goddess Aphrodite, the goddess of love, beauty and procreation and whose temple was known for its culture of prostitution.

In addition to the worship of a number of Roman and Greek gods, there was the cult of Isis, which originates in Egyptian culture, which esteemed wisdom and knowledge, and the cult of Mithras which emphasised 'mysteries'.

Their gods were distant, unapproachable and needed pleasing.

On top of all this, some scholars speculate that Corinth was influenced by pre-Gnostic thought, which denies that Jesus was fully human and believes in salvation by knowledge rather than grace.

So Corinth was a melting pot of Greco Roman culture and religion, obsessed with money, success, beauty, sex, reputation, and materialism.

All they were missing was Facebook or Instagram so they could broadcast how fabulous they were instantaneously.

Looking weak, being vulnerable, admitting defeat, humility were just not in their vocabulary.

Being compassionate wasn't part of their thinking either.

It certainly wasn't considered a virtue by the religions or philosophies of the day.

If you were struggling, you didn't let it show. It was British stiff upper lip in a Corinthian sort of way.

If you saw someone struggling, you wouldn't really want to get your hands dirty, or have your reputation affected by association.

So when Paul writes from a position of weakness it's because he's concerned that the Corinthians are distancing themselves from him and from the ministry of the gospel.

He's appealing to their loyalty and courage to continue partnering him even when gospel work seems weak, unglamorous, and counter-cultural.

Paul had been practising what he preached, 'speaking the truth in love' because he was so concerned about the risk of the Corinthians deviating from the truth of the gospel.

1. The Source of Comfort

The beginning of 2 Corinthians is pretty standard for Paul. The usual greetings, establishing his credentials.

But then he deviates from the usual pattern.

He describes God as the **Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.**

He's describing God as the source of compassion, the origin of that feeling of empathy that comes up when we see another suffering, that feeling that makes us want to act, to help, to support.

And why is this? What separates the God of compassion from the gods of love and knowledge that pervaded Corinthian culture, that pervades our culture?

Well it's all about relationship.

Unlike the pagan gods who are detached and self interested, the God of compassion is deeply interested, deeply concerned, deeply pained when he sees our pain.

And the God of compassion is thoroughly attached to his people. We are his children, made in his image. He knows us intimately. He knows our strengths and weaknesses.

He's secured the relationship through the work of Jesus on the cross, who was cut off from God in order to bring us back into relationship.

And he promises to be the God of all comfort.

Comfort that meets every need, every feeling, every emotion in a way that none of us can do for each other.

Have you ever been going through something difficult and painful? Illness, loss, disappointment?

Has someone with really good intentions but no real insight said 'I know exactly how you feel?'

And did you somehow resist the urge to smack them (metaphorically) and say 'Actually you have no idea'

God's comfort, his 'I know how you feel' is absolutely genuine and he actually does know.

When Jesus died, when he became our suffering servant, God experienced every possible emotion, every fear, every aspect of grief and loss, every degree of trauma that it is possible to feel.

He's the Father of compassion because he and he alone is qualified to comfort us.

And why is comfort important?

Because suffering is an inevitable part of life now.

It's part of living in a fallen, broken world, whether we follow Jesus or not.

It's part of taking up our cross if we do believe (Matt 10:38).

It's part of the way we grow and mature in Christ.

Romans 5:3-4

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

As Christians we're just as susceptible to suffering and pain as anyone else but we have hope in the midst of suffering because we know the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.

Paul himself is in the midst of suffering.

In verse 4 he describes 'our troubles' He's talking about himself and his fellow workers.

And in the middle of all this Paul is sustained and encouraged by the God of **all** comfort.

The God of immeasurable, unending comfort.

And now we see the work of comfort.

2. The work of comfort

4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

God comforts Paul, Paul comforts the Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 1:5

5 For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.

We know from reading the book of Acts and Paul's letters all the ways he suffered for the sake of the gospel.

It's not what we really want to hear is it? Abundant sufferings.

It's at the end of this same letter that Paul gives the most detailed list of his own experience in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29

He describes being imprisoned, being flogged, beaten with rods, pelted with stones, being shipwrecked, in danger at sea, on rivers, in danger from

bandits, from Jews, from Gentiles, in the city, in the country, from false believer. He's been hungry, thirsty, cold and naked.

Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

Really it was a miracle that he was still alive.

But somehow not only does he survive but he reframes his suffering as a way of sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

Not that he equates his suffering with Christ's but that he feels united to Christ through suffering.

There's something reminiscent of the words of Isaiah 40:1

Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.

We sense an intimacy and closeness, which contrasts with some of the severity of Paul's words to the Corinthians.

Perhaps you've had an experience, which has equipped you to understand and empathise with someone else in a genuine and meaningful way.

Close friends of mine, Kate and her husband, have three children. Their middle child is profoundly disabled and the fact that their faith and marriage has survived is a miracle.

Kate contacted me recently because her beautiful, smart, eldest daughter, doing her HSC this week, has developed that cocktail of mental health issues that seems to be an epidemic amongst teenage girls.

She knew that I'd be able to understand a little of what they're coping with because my daughter went through something similar.

She wasn't expecting that I could fix her problems but needed to feel understood. Kate and I have been friends for years but now we are united in a deeper, more powerful way.

When Kate contacted me, Andy my husband, reflected how interesting it is that God has equipped me through a really difficult experience to support a friend, that this is one way that God has worked out his good purposes.

So what is the work of comfort for the believer in the midst of suffering?

Comfort reminds us that every promise has its yes in Jesus and that by his dying to sin we have the promise of new life.

And knowing that Jesus understands our troubles keeps us from complete despair.

And verse 5 reminds us that we're not alone. We might feel it, especially lying awake in the middle of the night, imagining the worst outcome, the greatest fear.

We are not alone.

The God of compassion is our constant companion.

Which leads us to the

3. The Purpose of Comfort

2 Corinthians 1:6

6 If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.

Paul and Timothy live with the constant threat of suffering in some way or another but adding to their distress is the disunity and bickering, the weakness of the Corinthian Christians in the face of false teaching.

In the midst of this they are comforted by the truth of the gospel, which promises unity, healing, restoration and reconciliation.

And this is what they want to pass on to the Corinthians, to us.

This comfort helps Paul and Timothy persevere, to keep striving, to hold onto hope.

As the Corinthians receive comfort from Paul and Timothy, they are learning patient endurance.

As they endure persecution for their faith, they join in Christ's sufferings.

All of which will strengthen them not just as individuals, but as a church, as a body of believers supporting each other in a hostile environment.

And this is what we need too.

When suffering affects us we can lean on the comfort that the gospel promises, forgiveness from sins, the hope of everlasting life, which helps us live life now with a heavenly perspective.

And at the end verse 7, Paul reassures the Corinthians of his confidence in their capacity to endure.

7 And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

He reminds them of the 'economy of affliction and comfort'.

Their patient endurance will help them share in the apostle's sufferings and their comfort for the apostles will join with the comfort promised by the God of all comfort.

Far from fearing 'sufferings of Christ' the purpose of God's comfort is cause for praise and worship.

Isaiah 49:13

¹³ Shout for joy, you heavens;
rejoice, you earth;
burst into song, you mountains!

For the LORD comforts his people
and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.

We have comfort in suffering and hope in salvation.

So as we live in this broken world, as we live with consequences of our own failings, as we muddle through relationship issues, as we care for the sick, as we grieve with the bereaved, as we deal with stress or anxiety and depression we can take comfort that these things are all part of sharing abundantly in the sufferings of Christ.

We are in no way comparing his sufferings to ours. That's a competition we could never and would never want to win.

We share abundantly in his sufferings because we draw on and lean on the comfort that abounds, that overflows.

And where does that comfort overflow to?

It doesn't just stop with us.

Paul Barnett says

'God's comfort is to stir up compassion leading to the passing on to others of the comfort of God; it is not to terminate on the receiver.'
(The Second Epistle to the Corinthians)

It overflows through Christ to others.

So as we patiently endure suffering with Christ, for Christ, the comfort we receive wells up and is overflowing for the benefit of others who also need care, who need comfort, who need compassion, who need to hear the gospel, who need hope.

When we understand the meaning of suffering and understand that the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort is deeply concerned for us and longs to comfort us with the assurance of forgiveness and the sure hope of life eternal we will be better and better equipped to pour out the overflow of comfort on others.

We long to make sense of life don't we?

As we grow in Christ, perhaps we'll ask less why questions and more how questions.

Less why is this happening to me? Less what is God thinking? Which I must admit to sometimes.

And more what can I learn from this? What am I being equipped for? How will this help me to bless others?

In my own life, I have struggled for years now to understand why mental ill health affected both my kids. It's complicated, its painful, its disappointing, its so many things.

But I know the things I have learnt through God's compassion and comfort are the things I needed to learn. Dependance, prayerfulness, humility.

And I know I have been better equipped not just for my role as a counsellor but as a wife, a mother and a friend.

And God's comfort doesn't end. It really does overflow. In his word, in my church, my friends.

And I've learnt that trying to do it all by myself is vain conceit because firstly, its impossible and secondly, I deprive others of the opportunity to be a blessing to me.

Who am I to think I can do it alone?

Just last week, when I had been struggling, a friend sent me a clip of a lovely song that had really spoken to her at a particular time in her life.

It was a word in season. A song of comfort. A reminder of God's compassion.

As we better understand the character of God who is rich in mercy, who is compassionate and gracious through our own experience of suffering, we can model Jesus to those around us.

We shouldn't excuse ourselves from the comforting of others because he's promised that our comfort will abound.

We will have enough – enough energy, time, words, food, kindness, love.

Remember, the Father of compassion is the source. His grace is sufficient.

My good friend Sally Sims has written a really helpful book, *Together through the Storm*, on practical Christian care:

Sally says

'we want to bring Christian encouragement by sensitively and thoughtfully pointing one another to Jesus, the source of all grace, and to our heavenly Father, who loves and 'comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God'

(*Together through the Storm*)

