COMPASSION IS THE WORD
The Church of the Covenant

Two of the most important Jesus stories in all of scripture are that of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. Jesus, the greatest story-teller of all time, is illustrating why He has come and why God has sent Him into the world with two stories. And in those two stories are shared one key WORD. A Greek Word; a powerfully illustrative WORD; a Jesus WORD. It is a God’s WORD to you today...COMPASSION is the WORD...In the Greek the word that appears in both stories is esplagchizothae and it is the word we translate “compassion” It is the aorist tense of the word. This particular word appears only 6 times in the New Testament, once in the story of the Prodigal and once in Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan. It has a very, very specific meaning. These two stories of Jesus, the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan, are often referred to as “The Gospel in Miniature”; they rest at the very heart of why Jesus came and what He came to accomplish on earth. On Tuesday evenings with Dr. Jim Platt we are studying the importance of understanding the underlying meaning of the Greek words in order to better understand the text. As people in the Reformed Tradition we are called to understand scripture on its deepest possible level in order to be true to what God calls us to be as followers of Christ.

In the story of the Prodigal Son a man, symbolizing the Lord in the story, has a younger son who requests his part of the inheritance and goes off to a far country and squanders his money, his life, his faith and every value that the father sought to teach his son. The son “came to himself” (Luke 15: 17), determines to return to the Father, throw himself on his mercy and just be a hired servant. But the Father is eagerly awaiting his son’s return. He is standing vigil on the front porch, worrying about him, praying for him, standing on tiptoes awaiting the moment, his heart is at sea until he sees his beloved son once again. Then is recorded what I believe to be the very heart of the Gospel. The very heart of God. The very heart of everything that Jesus was sent into the world to do and be and accomplish in the name of the loving Father. It says, “But while he (the prodigal) was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had COMPASSION (esplagchizothae), and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” (Luke 15: 20) And the Prodigal is restored by the compassion of the loving father. He is not a servant nor a slave; he is restored as a son. The Father loves the son so much that he has COMPASSION...

The second story, that of the Good Samaritan, symbolizing the love that the Lord has for the broken and hurting in the world. The Good Samaritan is walking along a road where he comes upon a man who has been set upon by thieves. The man is bleeding and broken by the side of the road. Many who should have cared have walked by unmoved by what they see. But the Samaritan sees and as it says, “he had COMPASSION” (esplagchizothae) (Luke 10: 33) Perhaps a slightly better translation might be, “HE WAS MOVED BY COMPASSION”. Exactly the same Word; exactly the same story. A hurting broken person is restored by the COMPASSION of God. God’s heart is moved by COMPASSION; and the broken man by the side of the road is healed and restored. God’s heart is moved by COMPASSION and the Prodigal is forgiven and raised up to be a son once again. Do you see the importance of this one word in both of these essential stories of Jesus? Both words right at the very heart of the stories. Both words illustrating Jesus’ love. Both words illustrating the compassion of God in sending Jesus into our world!

So what is the meaning of the WORD COMPASSION set forth in these two stories? What does it mean that God has COMPASSION for the Prodigal and COMPASSION for the broken man by the side of the road? Our word “compassion” is the combination of two Latin words “Com”, meaning “together” or “with” and “Pati”, meaning “to suffer”. The Passion of the Christ is Christ’s suffering for and with us. Compassion means “to suffer together and with another”. It is not “pity”; it is not feeling “sorry” for
someone; it is not “sympathy”. Its not just, “Oh, I’m sorry you’re going through this right now”; its not keeping you over there and me over here in my sympathy for you. No its me willing to feel precisely what you’re going through; to enter existentially into your pain and being willing to feel your pain with you. Its not, “Oh how much pity I have for those poor starving Haitians way down there in LaCroix” No, its more like I weep every time I think about those nice young people who I know by name and care about and pray for each day, of kids I love, going days without food, having their hopes of going on to the university dashed. Empathy, perhaps –“I feel your pain.” It does not mean sympathy nor pity. I’m sure the Levite that walked by the broken man uttered some pious prayer “I will pray for you but I will not enter into your pain nor the alleviation of your pain.” I will just walk by and try to get you out of my head as quickly as possible –that’s the opposite of COMPASSION.

In the Greek the word *esplagchizothae* picks up on the idea of “suffering with and together with someone”. It most literally means to be MOVED WITHIN ONE’S MOST INWARD PARTS, moved within one’s bowels is how one commentator puts it, and bowels were seen as the seat of love and pity. It is a visceral, moving, existential, profound feeling deep within one’s being. We are MOVED deeply by our COMPASSION. We are hurting and in pain for another. Our heart breaks and our heart goes out to someone. When I heard the news that my Father had died and when I heard the news that my Mother had died there was a deep ache and pain within my heart, I was deeply moved within, I was almost doubled over in a pain which made me feel like I was going to die. That’s COMPASSION. That’s *esplagchizothae*. No mere tipping of the hat of pity or sympathy. No polite trite phrases. No, cold, at a distance expression of something that really won’t enter into someone’s pain. Compassion holds no one at a distance; rather it is willing to suffer with someone to the extent that the heart breaks, the wounds are shared, the pain is so intense that it doubles you over. That’s the COMPASSION the Loving Father had for the Prodigal upon his return. That’s COMPASSION the Good Samaritan had for the broken man by the side of the road. And that is the WORD that rests at the very heart of Jesus and the very heart of the loving Father who sent Him into our world to have COMPASSION on us.

So how do we know Jesus has compassion for us? Consider this –Jesus is hanging on the cross and dying for us. The love of His heavenly Father leads Him to the cross and Jesus willingly goes there. No man takes His life; He willingly goes to the cross to suffer for us. Ah, but He goes to the cross not only to suffer for us...but to suffer WITH us. For there is the moment when every prodigal thing done in our very prodigal world, all the world running away into far country and away from the love of God, there is a moment when all of that is laid upon the great heart of Jesus. Oh yes, and there is the moment when every bit of broken-ness in the world, every bit that has ever been, every bit of hurt and despair, suffering and pain, grief and loss, everything that has ever caused the human heart to break, there is a moment when all of it, every bit of it, is laid upon the Savior on the cross. Jesus personally and first hand experiences every bit of my pain and every piece of your grief. Jesus personally holds every bit of God-forsaken-ness, every bit of humanity’s turning its back on its Creator, every bit of our sin, every bit of our failings, every time we have let our Lord down, every bit of that is placed on the heart of Jesus on the cross. He suffers with us. He experiences our pain. He doesn’t sympathize, He empathizes. In our broken-ness and in our pain, in our worst prodigal moments when we failed Him most, HE HAS COMPASSION, and it is all laid upon His heart. And do you know what happens? His great heart breaks in two. Because HE has borne it all on a cross for you and for me. Why? Because HE HAS COMPASSION.

The Greek tense of the word we translate “compassion” is the aorist tense. That means it is both in the past AND continuing. He did in the past have compassion for us on the cross. He does in this moment have compassion for us on the cross in our suffering and our failures. He will in every future moment have compassion for us from the cross. That’s what the Greek word means. So Jesus’ great heart of
love breaks for us each and every day. Because HE HAS COMPASSION. What a SAVIOR! What a LORD! Compassion is the Word! Amen and Amen.

By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, Pennsylvania

IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!