

Growing up as the only Jewish boy in Sheridan, Wyoming presented its own set of unique consequences for Max Wachtel. One of them was learning how to keep a low profile in the schoolyard. As you can well imagine Max experienced his share of uncomfortable moments in the classroom, but the playground was even worse. He learned early on that the best way to keep from being the target of open hostility was to quietly mind his own business ... especially if something was happening that *he alone* seemed to find morally offensive.

So Max kept quiet when the other schoolboys found a turtle and decided to make a turtle ski jump out of the 35' high and very steep steel slide on the playground. By the time the fourth boy climbed to the top Max was feeling very uncomfortable, though he couldn't quite put a name on the feeling. On the fourth time down the *Slide of Doom* the turtles landed on its back so hard that the shell cracked. The boys stood stunned and silent. When the bell rang signally the end of recess the leader of the gang gingerly picked up the turtle and set it the grass.

That afternoon and ever after none of the boys, not even Max ever talked about what happened on the playground. Like many, or maybe even most, boys his age Max wasn't taught how to recognize his own emotions. In fact, he received positive feedback for remaining unaffected and calm no matter what was going on around him. Unfortunately, that kept Max from learning to recognize and regulate his emotional responses. Instead, he learned to stuff his feeling down and ignore them. Eventually, he came to take great pride in his ability to remain stoic and unshakeable. He also noticed that over time it became harder and harder to relate to how anyone else was feeling.<sup>1</sup>

Max Wachtel eventually became Dr. Max Wachtel, a forensic psychologist who "has worked with thousands of boys tangled in the legal system." He specialized in working with boys and young men who had become unemotional, "clueless about the motivation of others,"<sup>2</sup> and impervious to the pain and struggles of the people around them. Like school age Max, the

imprisoned boys and men Dr. Max worked with had ... from a young age ... stuffed down their feelings –mostly feelings of fear. Over the years Dr. Max became an expert about the societal costs of boys and men losing their ability to empathize with others and feel **compassion**. He compiled massive amounts of research that all reached the same conclusion: People who lack empathy and compassion are the most likely candidates for the kind of criminal behavior that results in incarceration.

The Gospel today points very deliberately to how Jesus' had compassion for the rag taggle crowds that followed him. The Greek word for compassion is σπλαγχνίζομαι (splanchnízomai). It's a word that I'll never forget because my Greek professor in seminary took a kind of grade school boyish delight in highlighting the word and explaining its root meaning.

"Splanchnízomai," he said, "means to have your bowels moved." 🌀 After the twittering in the class died down he went on to explain that in ancient times people believed that the bowels, not the heart, were the seat of love and pity. There is some logical sense in that. Think of how you feel when you see something horrible - like the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center collapsing into nothing more than a cloud of ash. You *think* about it in your head but you *feel* it in your gut. 🌀 Even now, whenever I'm quietly thinking about some of the images from that day, I *still* feel it in my gut.

So we find our compassionate Jesus today ... out in "a deserted place." Having arrived there by boat he searches deliberately for a spot to be alone. He has his *gut wrenching feelings* about the recent beheading of his cousin John the Baptist to deal with. When he arrives he finds the "deserted place" is actually very crowded with sick and suffering people. As burdened as he was, by his own grief and horror, it would have been perfectly understandable if Jesus had tried to sneak out unnoticed when he spotted the crowd. He doesn't sneak out though. He sees them. He sees their suffering and distress. That's called *pity*. He cares about their suffering and distress. That's called *sympathy*. He feels their suffering and distress himself. That's called *empathy*. Finally, and most importantly, Jesus has an **authentic desire to do something** to relieve their suffering and distress. THAT is called *compassion*. Psychologists define compassion

as: The ability to *see* another's suffering and distress, *care about* their suffering and distress, *feel* their suffering and distress AND then **want** to **do something** to relieve their suffering and . Compassion is not just having the feelings. Compassion includes **wanting** to help make that suffering and distress go away.

Jesus has compassion. By the psychological definition of compassion he clearly has it, but what about his disciples? Looking back at the reading it appears they aren't callous and hard hearted. They actually do *notice* that the crowds, many of whom are sick, have been out in the sun all day. If those people aren't hungry already, they imagine they will be soon. In noticing the looming possibility of the crowd growing very hungry they demonstrate that they have pity. And, when they go to Jesus and remind him that it's been a long day for everyone it suggests they have sympathy and empathy. But, telling Jesus to send the crowds away to deal with their hunger themselves ... that doesn't sound very compassionate. Does it? What do you think?



Every time this story comes up in the lectionary we get an opportunity to make a choice. We can choose to judge the disciples for their actions or we can try to understand them. If we decide that they have a lesson to learn and Jesus is there to hand it to them ... we judge them. If we decide they are worried about where their own supper is coming from ... we judge them. If we decide that they lack empathy and the compassion that arises from it ... we judge them. We have a whole lot of options for judging them! And, judging is easy to do. It doesn't take much energy or effort to judge someone. It takes a whole lot more effort and energy to try to understand them.

I decided to make that effort and read up a bit on the subject of compassion ... what it is ... how it works ... and especially where it comes from.

One of the first things I learned about compassion is that there hasn't been much research into it until recently. Suffering and distress have been studied in depth for many decades ...

compassion ... not so much. Also, many of us may have been rather misguided about the nature of compassion ... especially by Social Darwinists and economists who like to justify their Ayn Rand based economic theories. They've told us about our *natural* instinct for self-securing and self-promotion for a long time. You've heard their rallying cries I expect: Survival of the Fittest, Dog Eat Dog World, Learn to Swim With the Sharks. All they have said has conveniently lined up with certain ways of understanding original sin. It turns out, though, that there is a very very good chance that Social Darwinists, Ayn Rand following economists and a good number of theologians are all wrong. **There is a rapidly growing body of evidence supporting the idea that *compassion not competition* is humankind's natural state.**

Again, let's let this really sink deeply into our thoughts. **There is a rapidly growing body of evidence supporting the idea that *compassion not competition* is humankind's natural state.** Now, with that important thought in mind, it's a good point for us to turn back to Jesus and the disciples. What if Jesus wasn't handing the disciples a lesson they needed to learn? What if his compassion continued throughout the whole narrative from beginning to end and extends to the disciples? What if Jesus ... in his infinite knowledge of how God made humankind ... wants to lead the disciples back to who they really truly are in the core of their being? What if Jesus wants to help them revive, renew and bring to fullness the compassion that he knows *still* fully exists within them? ☞ What if Jesus wants to do that with us too?



Have you ever felt like you've lost your ability to care deeply about others? It's a disturbing thought, but it happens more often than most people would like to admit. It happens frequently to people in caring professions and those caring for elderly, disabled or diseased family members. For Christians feeling like you've lost the ability to care deeply about others is especially unsettling because we may believe that we are failing to live out and express our faith in actions. We may not feel as close as we once did to Jesus and as excited as we once did about doing our share of work in God's kingdom on earth. We may be judged by others around us who

notice that we aren't as caring, giving or willing to volunteer as we used to be. We may even wander away from the faith community rather than reveal our chronic physical and emotional exhaustion, irritability, self-contempt, and tendency to depersonalize situations and issues. We may wonder if the good feelings that come from giving of ourselves, time and possessions are gone forever.

Of course, we don't know if a kind of compassion fatigue or burnout is what the disciples were experiencing as they approached Jesus and told him to just send the crowds off to fend for themselves. But, if they suffering from compassion fatigue we do know one thing for sure. We know that Jesus had compassion for them ... every bit as much compassion as he had for the sick and suffering in the crowds. We also know that if they didn't have compassion fatigue Jesus had compassion because he knew how much joy and wellbeing they were missing. They weren't giving so they weren't receiving either. Jesus had compassion for them and showed it by providing that overwhelming abundance of fish and loaves. He gave it to them to give away. Apart experiencing a miraculous multiplication of resources ... they got to experience the equally miraculous physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing that Jesus and psychologist *both* tell us comes with acting altruistically.

Just think about how it must have felt for the disciples that day. Can you imagine what the disciples experienced as they gave away all that food to hungry people? It's hard to imagine I know, but try this: Think about a time you've worked at a food bank or a soup kitchen or a free concert or a homeless shelter or a prison filled with young men ... or ... a detention center filled with boys ... think about how it felt to give yourself away. Now, multiply that by 5,000. AMEN

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1 Max Wachtel, Ph.D. LLC dba Cherry Creek Press. [The One Rule For Boys: How Empathy and Understanding Will Improve Just About Everything for Your Son](#). FriesenPress, Victoria, BC, Canada, 2014.

2 Ibid.

3 Diana Divecha, Ph.D, Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. "Is Empathy Learned – or Are We Born With It?" *Developmental Science*, December 2, 2012. Web