

**The Hassled and Helpless**  
**Matthew 9:35-10:4; Luke 19:1-10**  
**6/15/08**

Zacchaeus climbs a sycamore tree to get a good view of Jesus. Why? He climbs the tree because he is short and cannot see over the crowd. He climbs the tree also because he has no friends, no one to say “Zacchaeus, come over here and stand in front of me. One moves over to make room for the short man. Zacchaeus has no community. No doubt it is partly his fault since he is a tax collector. He takes more money than is requested from the government to keep for him.

Jesus had compassion on the people. Jesus continues to have compassion on people. In the passage we read this morning Jesus has compassion on the crowd of people because they were harassed and helpless – sheep without a shepherd; no direction; no purpose; no meaning. Jesus sees people carrying their burdens – sometimes it is physical often spiritual and emotional. They are troubles, annoyed and mistreated. They are wearied from an endless journey. We live in an age of uncertainty, an age when people have ceased to be sure of anything. Geoffrey Haewood, headmaster of a great English public school, once said *the great tragedy and problem of this age is that we are standing at the crossroads, and the signposts have fallen down.*

Jesus has compassion on the crowds. Compassion is a word that is deeper than love. It describes the feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for someone else. It is a word that describes suffering, hurting, brokenness that impacts one's life – moves the heart in such a way that one gets involved. It means suffering with someone else. It moves beyond caring words to action. It often moves one out of their comfort zone, routine, and safety to get involved. It can be transforming because in the involvement one gives part of himself/herself away. Compassion will possibly move you from the comfortable to the uncomfortable.

Reflect on Jesus coming to the earth and dying on the cross because of his compassion.

I want to share four stories with you about compassion.

1. During the night someone –spray-painted obscenities in big foot-tall letters on the outside wall of the Leacock Presbyterian Church in Paradise, PA. The pastor invited the church to respond in love. In his sermon the next week, Robert Birch encouraged his congregation to consider the pain and brokenness of those who would write such things and deface property. “What we need to do is pray for them, not feel anger – forgive them and love them.” Members of the congregation painted over the graffiti then painted filled up the 4-by8-foot section with messages of love – *you are welcome here; may you find peace; God heals your pain.* This congregation looked at the vandals with compassion.
2. The next story is told by Fred Craddock, a minister and writer. My mother took us to church and Sunday school; my father didn't go. I complained about Sunday dinner being late when she came home. Sometimes the preacher would call, and my father would say, “I know what the church wants. Church doesn't care about me. Church wants another name, another pledge, another name, another pledge. Right? Isn't that the name of it? Another name, another pledge.” That's what he always said.

Sometimes we'd have a revival. Pastor would bring the evangelist and say to the evangelist, "There's one now, sic him, get him, get him," and my father would say the same thing. Every time, my mother would be in the kitchen always nervous, in fear of flaring tempers, or of somebody being hurt. And always my father said, "The church doesn't care about me. The church wants another name and another pledge." I guess I heard it a thousand times.

One time he didn't say it. He was in the veterans' hospital, and he was down to 73 pounds. They'd taken out his throat, and said, "It's too late." They put in a metal tube, and X-rays burned him to pieces. I flew in to see him. He couldn't speak, couldn't eat. I looked around the room, potted plants and cut flowers on all the windowsills, a stack of cards 20 inches deep beside his bed. And even that tray where they put food, if you can eat, on that was a flower. And all the flowers beside the bed, every card, every blossom, were from persons or groups from the church.

He saw me read a card. He could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare. If he had not written this line, I would not tell you this story. He wrote: "In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story."

I said, "What is your story, Daddy?"

And he wrote, "I was wrong."

3. The last story is about a boy names Teddy Stallard told by Elizabeth Silance Ballard

I have not seen Teddy Stallard since he was my student in my 5<sup>th</sup> grade class, 15 years ago. It was early in my career, and I had only been teaching for two years. From the first day he stepped into my classroom, I disliked Teddy. Teachers (although everyone knows differently) are not supposed to have favorites in a class, but most especially are they not to show dislike for a child, any child.

Nevertheless, every year there are one or two children that one cannot help but be attached to, for teachers are human, and it is human nature to like bright, pretty, intelligent people whether they are 10 years old or 25. And sometimes, not too often, fortunately, there will be one or two students to whom the teacher just can't seem to relate.

I had thought myself quite capable of handling my personal feelings along that line until Teddy walked into my life. There wasn't a child I particularly liked that year, but Teddy was most assuredly one I disliked. He was dirty. Not just occasionally, but all the time. His hair hung low over his ears, and he actually had to hold it out of his eyes as he wrote his papers in class. (And this was before it was fashionable to do so!) Too, he had a peculiar odor about him which I could never identify. His physical faults were many, and his intellect left a lot to be desired, also. By the end of the first week I knew he was hopelessly behind the others. Not only was he behind; he was just plain slow! I began to withdraw from him immediately.

Any teacher will tell you that it's more of a pleasure to teach a bright child. It is definitely more rewarding for one's ego. But any teacher worth her credentials can channel work to the bright child, keeping him challenged and learning, while she put her major effort on the slower ones. Any teacher can do this. Most teachers do it, but I didn't, not that year.

In fact, I concentrated on my best students and let the others follow along as best they could. Ashamed as I am to admit it, I took perverse pleasure in using my red pen; and each time I came to Teddy's papers, the cross marks (and there were many) were always a little larger and a little redder than necessary. "Poor Work!" I would write with flourish. While I did not actually ridicule the boy, my attitude was obviously quite apparent to the church, for he quickly became the class "goat," the outcast, the unlovable and the unloved.

He knew I didn't like him, but he didn't know why. Nor did I know then or now why I felt such an intense dislike for him. All I know is that he was a little boy no one cared about, and I made no effort in his behalf.

The days rolled by. He made it through the Fall Festival and Thanksgiving holidays, and I continued marking happily with my red pen. As the Christmas holidays, approached, I knew that Teddy would never catch up in time to be promoted to the sixth grade level. He would be a repeater. To justify myself, I went to his cumulative folder from time to time. He had very low grades for the first four years, but not grade failure. How he had made it, I didn't know. I closed my mind to personal remarks.

First grade: Teddy shows promise by work and attitude, but has poor home situation. Second grade: Teddy could do better. Mother terminally ill. He receives little help at home. Third grade: Teddy is a pleasant boy. Helpful, but too serious. Slow learner. Mother passed away end of the year. Fourth grade: Very slow, but well behaved. Father shows no interest. Well, they passed him four times, but he will certainly repeat fifth grade! Do him good! I said to myself.

And then the last day before the holiday arrived. Our little tree on the reading table sported paper and popcorn chains. Many gifts were heaped underneath, waiting for the big moment. Teachers always get several gifts at Christmas, but mine that year seemed bigger and more elaborate than ever. There was not a student who had not brought me one. Each unwrapping brought squeals of delight, and the proud giver would receive effusive thank yous.

His gift wasn't the last one I picked up; in fact it was in the middle of the pile. Its wrapping was a brown paper bag, and he had colored Christmas trees and red bells all over it. It was stuck together with masking tape. "For Miss Thompson From Teddy" it read. The group was complete silent, and for the first time I felt conspicuous, embarrassed because they all stood watching me unwrap that gift. As I removed the last bit of masking tape, two items fell to my desk; a gaudy rhinestone bracelet with several stones missing and a small bottle of dime store cologne half empty. I could hear the snickers and whispers, and I wasn't sure I could look at Teddy. "Isn't it lovely?" I asked, placing the bracelet on my wrist. "Teddy, would you help me fasten it?" He smiled shyly as he fixed the clasp, and I held up my wrist for all of them to admire. There were a few hesitant oohs and ahhs, but as I dabbed the cologne behind my ears, the little girls lined up for a dab behind their ears.

I continued to open gifts until I reached the bottom of the pile. We ate our refreshments and the bell rang. The children filed out with shouts of "See you next year!" and "Merry Christmas!" but Teddy waited at his desk. When they had all left, he walked toward me, clutching his gift and books to his chest. "You smell just like Mom," he said softly. "Her bracelet looks real pretty on you, too. I'm glad you like it." He left quickly. I locked the door, sat down at my desk, and

wept, resolving to make up to Teddy what I had deliberately deprived him of...a teacher who cared.

I stayed every afternoon with Teddy from the end of the Christmas holidays until the last day of school. Sometimes we worked together. Sometimes he worked alone while I drew up lesson plans or graded papers. Slowly but surely he caught up with the rest of the class. Gradually there was a definite upward curve in his grades.

He did not have to repeat the fifth grade. In fact, his final averages were among the highest in the class, and although I knew he would be moving out of state when school was out, I was not worried for him. Teddy had reached a level that would stand him in good stead the following year, no matter where he went. He had enjoyed a measure of success, and as we were taught in our teacher training courses, "Success builds success."

I did not hear from Teddy until seven years later, when his first letter appeared in my mailbox.

*Dear Miss Thompson,*

*I just wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduated second in my class next month.*

*Very truly yours,*

*Teddy Stallard*

I sent him a card of congratulations and a small package, a pen and pencil gift set. I wondered what he would do after graduation. Four years later, Teddy's second letter came.

*Dear Miss Thompson,*

*I just wanted you to be the first to know. I was just informed that I'll be graduating first in my class. The university has not been easy, but I like it.*

*Very truly yours,*

*Teddy Stallard*

I sent him a good pair of sterling silver monogrammed cuff links and a card, so proud of him I could burst. And now today Teddy's third letter.

*Dear Miss Thompson,*

*I wanted you to be the first to know. As of today, I am Theodore J. Stallard, M.D. How about that!??*

*I am going to be married in July, the 27<sup>th</sup>, to be exact. I wanted to ask if you could come and sit where my Mom would sit if she were here. I'll have no family there as Dad died last year.*

*Very truly yours,*

*Teddy Stallard*

I'm not sure what kind of gift one sends to a doctor on completion of medical school and state boards. Maybe I'll just wait and take a wedding gift; but my note can't wait.