

The Ministry of Peace and Justice

by Michael Jordan Laskey

Session 1 Handout

Introduction to Peace and Justice Ministry

One cold New York night, a group of college students and a Franciscan named Brother Angelo packed a van with sandwiches and a tank of hot chocolate and drove from the Bronx to Lower Manhattan. They parked at a street corner where the Franciscans spend time with the homeless throughout the year.

Within a few minutes, people began to congregate. The students passed out sandwiches and chatted with those who lingered for a moment. A middle-aged man who had emigrated from China approached one of the college kids. “Jian,” he said, pointing to himself. “Kevin,” the student replied. He handed Jian a sandwich and they shook hands. Jian couldn’t speak English and Kevin didn’t know Chinese, so they just stood there, smiling at each other. Five minutes passed, then ten. Kevin thought about waving good-bye and finding someone to talk to, but Jian didn’t seem to be going anywhere.

Thirty minutes went by. Forty-five. An hour.

Out of the corner of his eye, Kevin noticed the rest of the group milling around and pouring hot chocolate. He wasn’t feeling particularly helpful. Finally, after two hours of standing and smiling, Brother Angelo called out that it was time to go. Kevin shook Jian’s hand again and headed for the van. He climbed into the front passenger seat, next to Brother Angelo.

“Um, I’m not sure if you saw that,” Kevin said to Brother Angelo, “but I just stood with someone named Jian for two hours without saying a word. We just smiled at each other.” Brother Angelo said, “Well, if he was out here tonight, he must be having a pretty tough time. How many people do you think walk past him every day without even noticing? Maybe it’s better to spend time with someone than it is to hand over a five-dollar bill and turn away.”

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. (Luke 10:33)

It’s tempting, when we notice suffering, to turn away. The suffering of others is uncomfortable and complicated. There are no easy ways to fix human suffering. Brother Angelo’s lesson is that most of the time, the first thing we should offer someone in need is our presence.

The two religious leaders who pass by the wounded man in the Good Samaritan story probably noticed the suffering. But they didn’t know what to do, or they were in a hurry to get somewhere and didn’t want to be inconvenienced. Only the Samaritan stops and gives his presence. (It’s a remarkable twist, as Jesus’ Jewish community and Samaritans were enemies in first-century Palestine.)

The Samaritan’s decision to stop is one of the best scriptural examples of compassion—a word we often use without realizing its radical meaning. “The word ‘compassion’ is derived from the Latin words *pati* and *cum*, which together mean ‘to suffer with,’” write Henri Nouwen, Donald McNeill, and Douglas Morrison in their book *Compassion*.¹ “Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us

1. Henri Nouwen, Donald P. McNeill, and Douglas A. Morrison, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (New York: Image, 2006), 3–4.

to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears.”

So how might we practice Good Samaritan–style compassion in our own lives? First, it takes attentiveness: we can only be present to the suffering of the hungry or the despairing if we stay alert. Second, compassion requires a spirit of generosity. We have to be ready and willing to change our plans. Finally, it takes humility, which means accepting that we are not saviors with all the answers, while still trusting that God can use us as instruments of his love.