

## Helping Others

Romans 12:8c

Sermon Transcript by Reverend Ernest O'Neill

We are talking these past few days about the gifts God has given to different ones of us. These gifts we can exercise with one another. The gift we are talking about today is that of helping others. It is ridiculous for me, an Irishman, to be speaking to you Americans. I am now proud to be an American. It is ridiculous for me to be speaking about helping others. There is no question for people outside of America to recognize that Americans are the most generous people in the whole world. I can attest personally to the generosity of American because my wife and I have experienced it over the past 18 years.

The newspapers proclaim that America is so generous because they have so much money, and that is ridiculous because you are generous whether you have money or not; you keep giving whether you have money or not. So I would not dream of talking to you about generosity or helping others. You do that better than any of the rest of us in this world and have been doing it for years. I thank God for you. Undoubtedly that is why one newspaper commentator says, "Americans are still the world's last best hope." I think that is right--you are still the world's last best hope. So I couldn't from my own experience tell you anything about helping others. All I can do is attempt to tell you what God's Word says and pray that Jesus will give light to all of us as we study it.

Loved ones, will you look at the verse that mentions this gift. It is Romans 12:8. We studied "He who exhorts, in his exhortation" and "he who contributes, in liberality," and we will deal with "he who gives aid, with zeal" next Sunday. The one we will deal with today is "he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness."

I just point out to you that the English translation is dreadful, because it emphasizes the formal, cold doing of acts of mercy in an institutional fashion. In fact, that is not the gift that God has given to many of you--to "do acts of mercy." In that sense everybody does acts of mercy. The United Fund, they do acts of mercy. The United Nations, they do acts of mercy. Even communist states do acts of mercy in the support that they give to different countries. So the doing of acts of mercy in that formal kind of way is not what God intended to talk about at all.

Actually, when you think of it, that pious, cold way of doing acts of mercy isn't what we need in our society. Seventy-seven thousand of us were without electricity and we opened two emergency centers. You probably saw on television that they were absolutely swamped--with one person--because all the rest of us went either to motels or to friends. The truth is, there are many of us who do experience hardships, there are many of us who are underprivileged and there are many of us who lack enough food and money, but our society is remarkably well provided for from the point of view of institutional doing of acts of mercy. The fact is that not so many of us in this society suffer from the lack of people doing acts of mercy as from something deeper than that. That is what God actually inspired Paul to write in Greek originally. The English translation "he who does acts of mercy" is actually one Greek verb, "eleown" and means "to show compassion".

Many of you have been given this gift of showing compassion. The English word compassion comes from two Latin words, "cum" means "with" and passion is from a verb "patior" - to suffer. Compassion is "to suffer with" another person. God is saying, "I have given to some of you the gift of suffering

with other people, of being able to put yourself in their shoes, being able to put yourself in their place, being able to see out of their heart and eyes, and to feel what they feel". That is what our society dies from, isn't it? Our society doesn't really die because people are not doing those acts of mercy. I don't know that it dies too much from the lack of people putting up storm windows on someone's home who can't handle the storm windows. I don't know that it dies so much from someone being helped when their car breaks down on the freeway. What it does die from is the lack of people who are deeply interested in other people.

Who of us would not admit that sometimes we personally feel we are islands? I don't know if there is a wife or a husband or a father or mother or a son or daughter or a brother or sister, certainly there isn't an employee or an employer, a roommate or a business colleague, a fellow student in a class who does not feel very much an island, very lonely--very, very often. Not lonely in that they lack friends, or that they don't go to parties or that they aren't often with a lot of people enjoying themselves, but lonely in that they don't really feel that anybody else knows what they are thinking or feeling. In other words, there are many of us who receive all kinds of presents and gifts, but there aren't many of us who have a friend who we know is thinking about us as much as they think about themselves. There aren't many of us who would sit at home at night feeling we would love to go out somewhere knowing there is someone who is wondering how we are that night and if we are on our own. I think old people know they could ask us to put their storm windows on and we would help them. I think some people know if they have trouble with their car and they ask us, we will help them. But we are all reluctant to ask.

Actually it is not the thing being done that is important; it is the realization that somebody loves you as themselves. Somebody has put themselves into God's hands and said, "That's that, Lord. You take care of 'self'; you take care of the interests that used to be my primary concern and I'm going to make my primary concern my neighbors and friends." Suddenly that changes everything. When you begin to realize that somebody thinks of you the way most people think of themselves, then you begin to realize, "That person loves me as themselves!" Not that they in some institutionalized, self-restrained, pious way love themselves first and then having spooned in enough love for themselves, they decide, "I'll give some love to him." But it is somebody who doesn't think about themselves at all, and seems to think only of you--how you are and what you would like. That is compassion. Compassion is feeling with the other person; it is living in the other person's heart. I have met compassion and you probably have. I think we really felt it with our parents, didn't we? You had the flu or a cold or you were sick and your dad or mom would come in and say, "Oh, I wish it was me instead of you" and you really believed that. You really believed that they did wish it was them instead of you. They really didn't want you to suffer; they didn't want you to be sick.

Loved ones, that is God's plan for us--that all of us would at some time minister the gift of compassion to others. There are some of us who are specially endowed with certain gifts of tenderness and empathy and awareness that enable us in a unique way to show compassion to others. Of course the only way you can do it is if you have freedom from preoccupation with yourself, because showing compassion to others does take your time and it does take time that is usually inopportune. Have you ever thought of that? Can you help others as it suits you? Probably not. It is probably never "convenient" to have compassion on somebody else. It is not something that you can schedule into your normal program. In fact, the truth is, if you can, it probably doesn't come over as compassion to the other person. The only time another person really experiences compassion from you is if they know it is not convenient for you to show them this compassion. It is not at all convenient for you to be interested in them at this time, and so often it requires us to put ourselves out. Don't you think that this is part of the disease that we suffer in our society? We

are a most generous people; there is no question of that. We are more generous to the world than any other nation. We are even more generous with each other than any other nation, but isn't it true that we often feel that in this absolute plethora of giving and gifts a lack of real heart interest from the other person in our own life, in how we feel and in how we think?

Loved ones, that is the heart of compassion. The heart of compassion is not organizing lots of activities so that everybody has somewhere to go every night. The heart of compassion is thinking enough about your friends and neighbors and colleagues that you can actually think what they are thinking that night and feel what they are feeling. Then you go to them and say, "Look, I know you must be lonely tonight. We are going out. Would you like to come with us?" That is compassion. Or you observe your neighbor and see what they need done to their home and how it would help them, so you go to them and say, "Listen, I'd love to do this." That is compassion. It is suffering with the other person; it is feeling with the other person. That ministers love and warmth. That is what our society dies of. Our society dies not so much from lack of food or from people who are willing to do good deeds, but from the lack of a feeling that somebody else cares about us or is interested in us or knows the way we feel. That is it, isn't it? That applies to husbands and wives and mothers and sons and daughters and brothers and sisters. So many of us feel, "Nobody feels what I feel or is really interested in what I feel." That is showing compassion.

The rest of the verse is interesting if you will look at it. "He who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness." "With cheerfulness"--a kind of restrained complacency: "I want you to know you are depleting my stock, but I'm trying to forget that, so ha, ha, ha." The Greek word is completely different from that kind of pious, holy happiness. The Greek word is "hilaroteis" and it becomes "hilarity" in English. God says, "Those of you who show compassion to other people, do it with hilarity." The other meanings of it are "with merriment", with all the alacrity, promptness and willingness of people who are bursting with delight and joy. That is what God wants us to do. He wants us to be so sure that our Father has given us all we need and that he will continue to give it, that all we are is people who pass that off to other people. So we just shovel the stuff--the time, energy, money--over to others with delight and joy because we know as we give it, it will come to us.

Maybe the best example of that was St. Francis of Assisi. The Franciscans were known as the little poor saints. St. Francis died on frozen ground, naked. He asked to be allowed to die that way because he was so absolutely sure of the love of his dear Father in heaven and that everything that he had given to him was inside his heart. He was so content and filled with the warmth of God's love that, he never felt the frozen ground or the lack of clothes. He exchanged his clothes with any beggar who wanted to exchange them. He passed thousands of dollars through his hands and yet he owned nothing because all the time he had given over his own concerns into the Father's hands and felt he was simply a channel to pass it on to other people. Do you know what they called St. Francis and his followers? The masochists? The saints? The ascetics? No. "Les Jongleurs de Dieu" -- God's jugglers, God's comedians. He was a troubadour before he was converted, and when he was converted he had more reason for joy than ever before, because he was so delighted that his Father's spirit was inside him and that his Father was in control of his life, and so he called himself God's comedian or God's jester. Loved ones, it is with that kind of joy and delight that God says that we are to show compassion of each other.

This I'm sure will offend you heartily, both Catholics and Protestants, but there was a dear saint who followed St. Francis who was known as "The Tumbler of Our Lady" because when he saw the Virgin Mary's statue he became so delighted that he turned somersaults. Now that is the delight and joy

that the Father expects us to have, who have as our dear Father, the millionaire owner of the world. Then we will be thinking all the time not of ourselves, but of others, and will be passing on to them things that they need, things that God prompts us to give to them and we will do it with joy and alacrity and promptness and willingness and enthusiasm and delight because we will never sense that it is depleting our stock. It is simply the Father's gifts coming down.

Loved ones, we are meant to be channels who pass it on through to people, and the faster you give it away the faster the Father will pass it on to you. That is God's plan and that is the way it works. If you try to hoard the stuff you will eventually die like Howard Hughes. You will! If you once try to stop that flow you will die in your sense of poverty and your sense of never having enough. Somebody said to J. Paul Getty, "How many millions do you want to make?" and he said, "Just one more." Never satisfied. Yet St. Francis, who died on frozen ground, naked, felt he owned the world. That is what happens when we really accept that God our Father has put every one of us into His Son Jesus and has put Jesus' Spirit into our hearts, and the moment we believe that and begin to let Jesus be Himself in us, then we begin to show compassion to others, to suffer with others, with delight and hilarity.

What does the hilarity do? It convinces them--"He must really have a millionaire father and maybe that millionaire father is mine also." That is what happens. When you help with delight and hilarity as if you are not putting yourself out at all, then faith is built up in others that there is a limitless fountain for them too. That is what we are called to, so we really do need to love each other.

We need to stop this business of coming in and sitting down beside somebody and never asking their name. That is stupid. There is something unreal about that. It just isn't normal. You have to be a neurotic to do that, because we all know probably there is not one communist here; probably there isn't a murderer here.

We all have a lot in common; that is why we are here. We do need to start being normal with each other, talking to each other, loving each other and being interested in each other. I understand the suspicion that comes in a large city. You don't know who you are talking to, and you don't know who you are sitting beside, but I do think that even then God expects us to go out and take the risk. Love is risking yourself. God does want us to begin to love each other and help each other. A verse in James tells us not to say, "Go, and be clothed; go and be warm," but to let our faith clothe people and let our faith actually express itself in actions that warm people. Let's start putting ourselves in each other's shoes and try to think for each other. You will be amazed how free you become of yourself, and then you will be amazed how faithfully the Father looks after you.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we thank you for God's comedians. We thank you for dear people like St. Francis who have shown us so plainly that you take care of those who take care of your children. Father, we know you will.

We see, Lord, the need of our society is people who will think about others and think how others are feeling. Lord, we would begin to do that. We would get ourselves out of our own narrow preoccupation with ourselves. We would begin to wonder how the other person feels today. I wonder if they have somewhere to go this Thanksgiving. I wonder what they are going to do for Christmas. I wonder do they need help with painting or repairing something in their home. Lord, we would begin

to be practical in our love and our interest in each other.

We know, our Father, that when someone does that for us, we feel the world is turned upside down and we feel we have entered into a heaven of love. Lord, we would give ourselves to you to bring that about in our place of work, in our home and in our church.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit guide us today and throughout this week. Amen.