

Being Christ's Compassionate Hands

STEVEN A. SMITH

I am grateful for the opportunity to deliver this devotional address. It is somewhat frightening to stand on the stage in the de Jong Concert Hall. This is actually my second time on this stage. I once performed here as a baritone horn player in the Farrer Junior High Band—perhaps setting an all-time record for the most wrong notes ever played during a performance in this building. That experience has helped me prepare so that I might avoid any wrong metaphoric notes in this address today.

My childhood home was on Ninth East, here in Provo, directly across the street from the old Heritage Halls, so I considered the BYU campus to be my playground as a boy. I remember when many of these buildings, including the Harris Fine Arts Center, were under construction. I have memories of traipsing around the excavation site of this building when I was about five years old. While the memory of my adventure into the HFAC construction pit is somewhat vague, I have a clear recollection that I was with my older brother, Thales, who is eight and a half years older than I.

I have six siblings. Thales is the oldest, and I am the fifth of my parents' seven children. Because there were three sisters born between Thales and me, my parents told me Thales was especially happy to have a younger brother, and his happiness at having a brother certainly showed during subsequent years. By the time I was about four, Thales often took me with him and his friends on their adventures. I always felt proud when I was with this group of older boys. Before I learned to ride a bike, Thales would wrap a towel around the crossbars of his Murray bike and set me on the towel. Then we would zoom around the streets of Provo. And, no, we weren't wearing helmets. Lizard hunting in the foothills, hiking to the Y, purchasing penny candy at Rowley's Market, and running through the buildings under construction at BYU are all wonderful memories—made especially sweet by the kindness and presence of my big brother.

One evening, when I was about eight or nine, I was asleep in the top bunk bed in the upstairs

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bedroom I shared with my brother. Perhaps while having a particularly vivid dream, I rolled over in my sleep, slipped off the edge of the bunk bed, and crashed to the floor. Thales was in a downstairs room immediately below my room, having arrived home from a date. He heard the crash, rushed upstairs, and found me winded and tearful on the floor. I do not remember what he said, but I remember him lifting me and gently putting me back into bed.

I wish everyone had an older brother like mine, someone on whom you can always depend when you fall. Sadly, my professional experience as a psychologist teaches me that many do not enjoy this privilege. The brave individuals with whom I work often face life alone, trying to understand their struggles in life and the sadness that consequently besets them. They often have no one to lift or help them. Even those who have intact families, kind and loving parents, and good friends often fight to find happiness and purpose in life or to feel connected to others. At times the perceived isolation clients experience is incapacitating, intensifying the struggles they face. They need others!

In the parable of the good Samaritan, the Savior drew our focus from the wounded man to two figures, a priest and a Levite:

And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw [the wounded man], he passed by on the other side.

And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.¹

As I have read this parable over the years, I have previously been inclined to condemn the inaction of the priest and the Levite. After all, they were in positions of authority and might rightly be expected to provide comfort, solace, and care for the wounded man. In recent readings, however, I have begun to consider what the priest and the Levite may have been thinking when they passed the wounded, suffering man. I suspect that their thinking may have paralleled that of many in contemporary society who witness suffering while passing “that way”:

“I can’t help.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“I feel awkward.”

“I don’t know this guy.”

“He shouldn’t have been walking here at night!”

“Someone else with greater expertise will show up to help.”

As Elder Gerrit W. Gong suggested in his most recent conference address, “Though we should help each other, too often we pass to the other side of the road, for whatever reason.”²

There are many reasons why we may pass by when friends or acquaintances experience intense spiritual difficulties or psychic isolation. Those in their immediate sphere may feel inadequate, not knowing what to do. At times the suffering of our acquaintances and loved ones seems quite beyond our help and understanding. We may feel justified in “pass[ing] by on the other side.” As a young therapist in training, I remember being frightened by the intensity of the suffering some of my clients experienced. I sometimes wondered whether there was anything I could say or do to alleviate their pain. At times I felt completely inadequate. Perhaps some of you have felt a similar inadequacy while witnessing the suffering of another.

Nonetheless, our duty as disciples of Christ charges us to engage with those who are suffering. In the book of Mosiah, Alma taught that those wishing to be baptized would make a covenant “to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light,” and “to mourn with those that mourn” and to “comfort those that stand in need of comfort.”³

The call to alleviate suffering in others can be one of our more challenging Christian duties. We may perceive ourselves as being inadequate and thus excuse ourselves for not helping. However, as difficult as this duty may appear to be, it can paradoxically prove to be one of the most satisfying. Stopping to help, giving what we can—even when we feel inadequate—may not only alleviate the suffering of one of Heavenly Father’s children but can also, through our choices to help those in need, actually engender small changes in our character and give us greater confidence in our ability to be a compassionate disciple.

We may also experience gratitude and peace as we recognize that our efforts to ameliorate the suffering of others are a part of becoming more like the Savior. In a moving conference address in the midst of his personal suffering from leukemia, Elder Neal A. Maxwell remarked:

In bringing to pass the beneficent Atonement, certain things were utterly unique to Jesus. These cannot be replicated by us, the beneficiaries of the glorious Atonement with its gift of universal resurrection but also its proffer of eternal life (see Moses 6:57–62). . . .

However, on our smaller scale, just as Jesus has invited, we can indeed strive to become “even as [He is]” (3 Nephi 27:27). . . .

By sharing as best we can in the sufferings and sicknesses of others, we too can develop our empathy—that everlasting and vital virtue. We can also further develop our submissiveness to God’s will, so that amid our lesser but genuinely vexing moments we too can say, “Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42).⁴

Despite the blessings that providing succor to others may bring, it is common to believe that we are inadequate and cannot help. So how do we overcome the feelings of fear and inadequacy that often accompany our attempts to alleviate suffering? How do we find the courage to emulate the Savior and move forward when we believe our efforts are insufficient? Here are some suggestions that may help.

Let Go of Human Rating

One of the most common reasons we may fail to offer aid and help is our tendency to judge others or ourselves as being inadequate. One of the most common and debilitating irrational beliefs is a tendency to engage in human rating. Human rating is the belief that we can somehow accurately rate human beings as adequate or inadequate.

We are hampered by human rating. Individuals and organizations in our society use this natural human tendency in many ways. Some of the most obvious examples can be seen in advertising. Advertising emphasizes the human tendency to compare ourselves with others and pushes the

message that we can be better through the purchase of the right kind of car, chewing gum, or dish detergent. Interestingly, part of our economy is driven by human rating and individuals’ tendency to purchase goods to help them “be better.” Another—and even more subversive—trigger of human rating has in recent years taken center stage in the lives of many individuals. My clinical experience suggests that social media can be even more misleading and destructive than advertising. Social media platforms of every stripe routinely but falsely suggest that others’ lives are happier, more glamorous, and more exciting than our own. Consciously or unconsciously rating ourselves based on misleading or altogether false images or information can lead to frustration, anger, or depression. Both advertising and social media heighten our own natural tendency to see ourselves as “less than” others. In summary, human rating stops us from being who we truly are and who Heavenly Father intends us to become.

Do you believe that you may be inadequate or that what you have to offer will not be good enough? You are in good company. In order to help his clients at BYU, my colleague Stevan Lars Nielsen has searched the scriptures for verses to help clients struggling with irrational beliefs such as human rating. Lars has found scriptural references in which even great prophets engaged in human rating. One of my favorites, from Ether 12, involves Moroni. The Lord commanded Moroni to finish his father’s history, assuring him that our generation would benefit, but Moroni was worried:

And I said unto him: Lord, the Gentiles will mock at these things, because of our weakness in writing; for Lord thou hast made us mighty in word by faith, but thou hast not made us mighty in writing. . . .

Thou hast also made our words powerful and great, even that we cannot write them; wherefore, when we write we behold our weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words; and I fear lest the Gentiles shall mock at our words.⁵

Isn’t it fascinating? This remarkable, courageous prophet of God believed he was inadequate. As is true for you, Moroni’s writing has repeatedly inspired me, yet he believed his writing was

weak. The reason his writing is in fact “powerful and great” is found in verse 27:

*And if men [and women will] come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto [women and] men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all [women and] men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.*⁶

The truth is that we are weak, just like every other human on the face of the planet. However, the greater truth is that our efforts to love and lift, though given by a fallible human, will be enhanced through Heavenly Father’s loving guidance and influence.

Show Patience and Respect

My sons, Josh and Matt, have an exceptional ability to approach virtually any animal, even seemingly vicious dogs, and calm them. It is amazing to watch. When Josh was fourteen, he and I were camping in Canyonlands National Park. Some sweet little birds with the unfortunate name of tufted titmouse were fluttering around the piñon pines in our campground and rushing to the ground to pick up seeds or the crumbs from our meals.

Josh said, “Dad, I’m going to get one of those birds to eat from my hand.”

Noting the birds’ skittishness, I dismissed his assertion with something like, “Good luck with that,” and settled in my camp chair to read.

About an hour and a half later, Josh quietly called to me: “Dad. Dad!”

When I looked up from my book, there were three titmice standing on his hand eating some crumbs from a piece of bread. I was astonished! Josh is arguably our most active child and has struggled with attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity. Yet his amazing patience and kindness brought these little birds flocking to his hand. I could not replicate it.

Camping in the same campground some years later, Matt was playing his guitar and singing “Blackbird” by Paul McCartney. A little titmouse

lit in the tree next to him and started twittering every time he sang the song. He sang it two or three times, and each time the bird flew back and started to twitter. I could not replicate that either.

What is it about my sons that gives them this special skill? Observing them, I think they show patience and respect toward their animal friends. I observe them doing the same toward their human friends. My son Josh is a social worker, working with boys with autism spectrum disorder. Matt works in customer service. Both are noted for their ability to calm difficult situations in their work. They certainly follow the apostle Peter’s counsel:

Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous:

*Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing; but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing.*⁷

I saw the ability of “not rendering evil for evil” but showing patience and respect beautifully demonstrated by a widow, Anne, who showed kindness when rebuffed by another. Anne was assigned to visit teach another woman in her ward, Betty, who had recently lost her husband. Betty was beside herself with grief and loneliness and pushed away any attempt by ward members to approach her.

As Betty explained later, “I was angry and frustrated, and I could not bear to be around others. At the same time I longed for someone to break through to me. I just didn’t know what to do!”

When Anne went to Betty with some flowers to express her condolences, Betty pushed the door shut in Anne’s face, loudly telling her that she did not want visitors and did not want or need anything from neighbors! Anne slowly walked home, wondering what she should do. After spending a few minutes at home praying and thinking about her own loneliness and sadness, Anne decided to return to Betty’s home.

After knocking, Anne was surprised when Betty opened the door. Anne pulled Betty into an embrace, held her tightly, and said, “I’m so sorry you are hurting.”

Rather than pushing Anne away, Betty melted into Anne's arms and sobbed, all the while saying, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

My father-in-law used to say that people need love the most when they are the least lovable. The ability to move past individuals' anger and their being upset comes when one sees that the expressed emotion is not necessarily the primary emotion an individual is experiencing. What allowed Anne to cut through Betty's angry exterior? I believe it was patience and respect—patience to know that Betty's grief was masked as anger and respect borne of Anne's recognition of her own loneliness and sadness. While Betty did not appear to be very lovable, Anne recognized that she needed love and compassion.

Develop Compassion and Empathy

I would like to return to the apostle Peter's counsel: "Finally, be ye all of one mind, having *compassion* one of another, love as brethren, be *pitiful*, be courteous."⁸

Two years ago, the therapists in Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) were privileged to receive two days of training from Dr. Paul Gilbert, the founder of compassion-focused therapy (CFT). Dr. Gilbert's approach to therapy has had a crucial influence on the way I do therapy. Dr. Gilbert sees compassion as an essential ingredient for alleviating suffering for self and others. He believes "the compassionate mind is the mind that transforms."⁹ Dr. Gilbert stresses the importance of developing compassion for self and of learning to know and understand one's more difficult life challenges. I note that as clients learn to demonstrate compassion for their own difficulties, they are better prepared to show compassion toward others.

Dr. Kristin Neff, another psychologist studying self-compassion, has stated, "Compassion is, by definition, relational. Compassion literally means 'to suffer with,' which implies a basic mutuality in the experience of suffering."¹⁰ Thus compassion is more than a recognition of an individual's negative experience and feeling badly about it. It implies an ability to "suffer with" an individual who is struggling. Like Dr. Gilbert, Dr. Neff stresses developing compassion for self.

Self-compassion requires a willingness and ability to develop compassion and empathy for self.

A synonym of *compassion* is *empathy*. As a beginning therapist, I spent a great deal of time learning to reflect clients' words and feelings, hoping that I could establish what my professor called "accurate empathy." I still find it very satisfying when a client says, "That is exactly what I mean!"

Compassion and empathy require real work. It can be difficult to understand oneself or another person. It is even more difficult to enter suffering with oneself or another. Perhaps this difficulty is one of the things that leads us to the other side of the road, wanting to help but struggling to find the ability to enter suffering with self or with another. Yet a willingness to enter and understand suffering can be one of the most healing things we can do.

For several years my daughter Brittany worked as an aide at the Dan Peterson School, a school in the Alpine School District for children with severe and profound disabilities. This was a natural fit for Brittany. She worked effectively with children with severe physical and mental disabilities, especially focusing on the deaf and blind population. Administrators, faculty, aides, parents, and students at the Dan Peterson School loved Brittany. Her natural happiness combined with her deep compassion for the students made her a tremendous asset to the school. Britt would often cry at the circumstances of the children with whom she worked. She truly worked to "suffer with" her students.

Brittany always wanted me to visit the school and meet her students. She felt so proud of them and wanted me to interact with them. On the occasions when I was privileged to meet Brittany's students, I marveled at the way Brittany saw them, not as persons with profound disabilities but as her friends, deserving of deep love and respect. One time a deaf and blind boy in Brittany's class grabbed her hair and pulled—hard! Britt could not get him to loosen his grip, and when other aides were finally able to get his hands loose, he had a handful of her hair. When I asked about it later, Brittany felt no anger, not even frustration, with this boy. "He can't help it, Dad. Imagine what his world must be like."

Truly, I had never stopped to imagine what his world was like. I suppose that was the secret to Brittany’s success in the school. She stopped to imagine what her students’ world would be like, and, having entered their world, she loved these students with a true Christlike love.

Remember, We Are All in This Together

Some of the most enduring images from the Book of Mormon are those of Lehi’s and Nephi’s visions of the iron rod. When truly studying the Book of Mormon, one cannot help feeling the power of the visions and their personal applications. I find myself asking, Where am I in this dream? In the field, on the path, in the building, near the tree? Most times I picture myself somewhere on the path, cautiously moving forward through the mists of darkness while trying to keep contact with the iron rod.

This may be where many of us imagine ourselves to be: moving forward and trying to find or maintain contact with the iron rod while the difficulties of life swirl around us. Although the visions do not suggest it, in my mind I see individuals helping one another forward, holding to one another as they try to find their way toward the love of God represented by the fruit.

My dear friend Dr. Gary Weaver was one who helped many people find and keep contact with the iron rod as they moved on the path toward the love of God. When Gary was eighteen, he went on a six-week BYU survival trip that changed his life. It was on that trip that he adopted this motto: “If I help others, the Lord will give me everything I need.” It was this motto that guided his life of service. Over the years, Gary ran more than 160 weeklong survival trips in the Boulder and Escalante areas of southern Utah. Through these trips he helped more than 4,000 people learn about themselves and strengthen their relationships with the Lord. Most of the people Gary took on survival trips were counted as “the least of these”¹¹—people who were metaphorically wounded and lying at the side of the path.

I was privileged to accompany Gary on one of the survival trips with thirty high school students from the Nebo School District. The experience touched me deeply as I watched Gary help the

young women and men find healing and found my own healing and a firmer grip on the iron rod. I was part of a group trying to find our way in the desert, through a swamp, and along difficult paths. During all the time we hiked, Gary encouraged us to work together to solve problems, help one another, and move toward our goal. In the evenings, exhausted and tired, we would spend time recounting the day’s experiences and listening while Gary’s harmonica playing lulled us to sleep.

More than twenty years ago, when policies and practices in the Nebo District changed, Gary was no longer able to lead survival groups. While other therapists who Gary had mentored continued to lead groups of troubled youth on survival, I was anxious to share the experience with those I love. I asked Gary to come out of survival retirement and help me lead a group. He kindly did so, even though he had suffered a heart attack. Twenty-four years on, I have been privileged to take more than 200 family members, friends, colleagues, youth from our ward, and each of my three children on a weeklong adventure through the desert.

Perhaps the most remarkable part of doing these survival groups is noting the absence of human rating—seeing instead the patience and respect as well as the deep compassion and empathy group members show one another as they move along the path. I frequently note the Christlike qualities of our survival group members. While not stated specifically, in the groups there is a feeling of “we are all in this together.” I am humbled as I experience our group members showing deep, caring love for one another. I am humbled when they bear one another’s burdens and comfort one another, sending the message that they are in life together, that they are not alone. They help one another feel the love of God. To me, that is the essence of Christian service.

Conclusion

The Fall of Adam and Eve was literal in that their transgression banished them from the presence of the Lord. But the term *fall* has profoundly resonant application in our own lives, beyond our being heir to the consequences of Adam and Eve’s original Fall. It is clear to me that everyone metaphorically falls out of the bunk bed and lands on

the floor winded and hoping someone will come to help, as was my situation on that night so many years ago. Years have passed, but I remain grateful for the memory of my older brother lifting me, comforting me, and putting me back in bed. I recognize that many of God's children fall from much greater heights than the top bunk bed. But a fundamental and profoundly personal doctrine of the Atonement is that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ—our Elder Brother—is there to pick us up, dry our tears, and heal the wounds we have received while living in a fallen world.

The point of my address today is simply this: a humbling duty we have as disciples of Christ is to be His hands in helping make this happen. We can be there to pick others up, dry their tears, and even heal their wounds. In the words of the hymn, "I would be my brother's keeper; I would learn the healer's art."¹² It is my heartfelt conviction that doing so is not only our Christian duty but also one of the greatest blessings afforded us by a wise, loving Father in Heaven. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Luke 10:31–32.
2. Gerrit W. Gong, "Room in the Inn," *Liahona*, May 2021.
3. Mosiah 18:8–9.
4. Neal A. Maxwell, "Apply the Atoning Blood of Christ," *Ensign*, November 1997.
5. Ether 12:23, 25.
6. Ether 12:27.
7. 1 Peter 3:8–9.
8. 1 Peter 3:8; emphasis added.
9. Paul A. Gilbert and Choden, *Mindful Compassion: How the Science of Compassion Can Help You Understand Your Emotions, Live in the Present, and Connect Deeply with Others* (Oakland, California: New Harbinger Publications, 2014), 300.
10. Kristin Neff, "Embracing Our Common Humanity with Self-Compassion," *Self-Compassion*, self-compassion.org/embracing-our-common-humanity-with-self-compassion.
11. Matthew 25:40.
12. "Lord, I Would Follow Thee," *Hymns*, 2002, no. 220.