

Daily View

“But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’” Hebrews 3:13

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“EMPATHY IS ABOUT STANDING IN SOMEONE ELSE’S SHOES, FEELING WITH HIS OR HER HEART, SEEING WITH HIS OR HER EYES. NOT ONLY IS EMPATHY HARD TO OUTSOURCE AND AUTOMATE, BUT IT MAKES THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE.”

DANIEL H. PINK

Mail Call Empathy

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Mt. 9:36

I often heard preachers quote Matthew 9:36, a passage that tells us that Jesus cared about all aspects of a person’s life, including their feelings. But, on reflection, I realize I wasn’t nearly as compassionate as I should have been as a young man. Oddly enough, thinking back on “mail call” convicted me.

Until about the mid-90s, two forms of communication were available, if you could not see the other party in person. You either called on the phone or wrote a letter. Since long distance calls were expensive, hand-written letters were the most common.

In the military, letters were distributed each day through a system known as “mail call.” We were told to “fall in” (i.e., assemble) and a sergeant would call out the names of those who were fortunate enough to receive a letter that day.

During the 8 weeks of basic training, I received letters a couple of days a week from my mom. Some of the young men received more, because they had a girlfriend (or even a wife) back home and some hardly ever received any at all.

After basic, I met Christie and when I got Hawaii we began to write letters back and forth every day. Mail call for me was wonderful. I received a letter every day from my wife-to-be. That not only made me happy, but also made me the envy of most of the guys in the platoon.

But some of the young men *never* received any mail. Yet, every single day, my name would be called at least once, sometimes twice. Some of the guys in the unit would needle me, good-naturedly, while others resented me because of it. Of course, I didn’t care about that — I was in *looooooove*...

After we got married in September, 1969, I really never gave “mail call” much thought. But that changed the first year I went to FC Camp and learned about “Candy Grams.” A “candy gram” is a note — almost always expressing admiration — written from one camper to another camper or a counselor. That’s the “gram”; it includes a little 50 cent candy item which explains the “candy.”

In the past, these were distributed at dinner time when one of counselors would get everyone’s attention and then — like

military mail call — shout out the names of campers and counselors who received a “candy gram.” I didn’t think too much about it at first but then I noticed that some campers — and even counselors — were getting lots of these notes, while many campers hardly, if ever, got any. I immediately flashed back to my Army mail call days and thought of the poor young men who never received any mail. It really hit me: this is the same thing. Back then, when it came to getting mail, I was the “popular camper/counselor.” I didn’t sympathize with the men back then, as I should have, but I felt for the candy gram-less campers.

Later, when Christie and I started running the snack shack, we were responsible for selling the candy for the grams and editing the notes, to make sure there was nothing off color, rude or crude in the message. That is hardly ever a problem.

But we did discover a couple of things that were disturbing. As mentioned above, the more popular campers, counselors and FC friends got lots of candy grams while others received nothing at all. It was embarrassing if your name was never called. So, a few kids were writing candy grams to *themselves*, to avoid embarrassment. We talked about this and the directors, Angie and Matt, changed the candy gram procedure. It’s done privately now.

I wasn’t compassionate when I was being envied for getting a lot of mail. I was only thinking of myself. But that didn’t really hit me until those first couple of years at camp and watching the candy gram exercise that, inadvertently, made some seem more significant than others. Paul wrote, in Philippians 2:3-4,

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

He follows that command with this, in v. 5, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...” Compassion for the plight of others — even the way they feel in little things — is one of the most Christ-like qualities we can develop.