

September 18, 2016

Sermon: Healing A Wounded World: The Place of Compassion

Text: Luke 15: 11-32

In Karen Armstrong's book, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, the suggestion is that compassion is at the heart of all religions. This is good news for all of us who believe it should be at the heart of all religions. So, why do we need to talk about the place of compassion in our faith and re-affirm its centrality?

Our scripture today from Luke asks us to remember that healing from being wounded begins with compassion. In all three parables in this chapter, the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son or prodigal son, are about finding that which is lost. It is told because the religious leaders are grumbling, complaining. They say that Jesus welcomes sinners, he sympathizes with them, and even eats with them. He was, in their opinion, a bad example of one who claimed to be good and honorable before God.

For them, if you are a good person and do things in the right way, you will not tolerate the actions and attitudes of bad people even if those who are sorry for their actions want forgiveness. You just can't tolerate those things and you separate yourself from them.

What does Jesus say? Our understanding of God should be one who never gives up on anyone and always forgives, forgives and forgives again. Because God can do this, we should be doing it as well. Be compassionate as God is compassionate as the Sermon on the Mount would suggest. Is that possible?

One of the classes offered during my study week at Christ Church Collage in Oxford, England, during August was about how we cultivate a climate of compassion. One of the texts used for this class was the one I spoke of earlier, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. It is a fascinating look at concepts of compassion across all of the world's major faiths -- and includes the concept that one need not be religious in order to have a compassionate viewpoint.

If compassion is central to all religious traditions as the religious historian Karen Armstrong states, then how do we practice this central message of the Golden Rule which is to love your neighbor as yourself. This concept is not only central but is the key to the good life we want for ourselves and for all people. Why is it so difficult to take steps to apply it and practice it in our lives? We seem to go out of our way to find it and miss it; we just pass it by when it is so close.

It's like the example of the woman who drove 900 miles across several countries over two days, even though her destination was just 90 miles away in her own country, Belgium. Her GPS system device failed to get her in a timely manner to her destination but she followed it and did not ask questions. GPS systems are great but there are cases of them leading drivers down abandoned roads and using outdated data in rural areas.

What about our faith and the teachings we hold dear. Do we need to question them and re-think, re-visit their meaning and intention? Like a faulty GPS, can we miss the right roads to our destination? I believe the answer is yes. Karen Armstrong says we are hardwired for compassion--just as we are hardwired with the capacity for aggression —so why do we let the tendency for aggression get the best of us?

The message of Jesus to those he taught and to those religious leaders who were engaged with him in conversation was to re-think, re-visit this question. In the story, the leaning was toward compassion and this was the climate Jesus' encouraged to cultivate rather than harsh judgment, aggression and punishment.

Maybe there's room for us ask how we are cultivating a climate of compassion here in our church and in our own spiritual lives. Surely, we can say that our worship, our prayers, our meditations, our mindfulness, our music, our words, our thoughts are to create and cultivate a climate of compassion. Is that what is happening?

Today I hope we may commit ourselves to this invitation once again by naming compassion as our first response when a response is needed. We affirm that compassion is the central virtue of a life centered in God as known in Jesus. When Jesus in a few words summarized theology and ethics, the character of God and how we should live, he said, "Be compassionate as God is compassionate" (Luke 6.36) That, for me is what the loving father in the story of the lost son is about. It is forgiveness, love, compassion and mercy even when undeserved.

So, we then take the next step. We allow compassion to have a central place in our own lives by cultivating a compassionate, loving spirit within us. It is not easy and does not happen without some work. The beginning place for us is self-compassion. Compassion literally means, "to suffer with." Before we can be compassionate or merciful toward others we must be compassionate with our own suffering, and accept it fully and mindfully.

This means fully embracing ourselves and our journeys, never denying our own suffering. When we deny our own suffering, we cannot embrace or understand the suffering of others. Our bulletin cover this morning is a way for us to lift our Neighbors in Need offering coming in October and a way to engage with the people our offering will help. We allow the power of technology or conversation or some other form of communication to give us a window into our own needs and the needs of others.

Just yesterday, I was reading the story of Susan Burton on my Starbucks app—yes, good old smart phone technology connected me with Susan who spent almost 20 years of her life in the custody of the California state prison system. Fighting drug and alcohol addiction, she was in and out of the prison system with six convictions all related to crime and addiction.

Susan's story is about her determination to break her pattern; it is a story of her persistence to care enough about herself to get clean, land a steady job and seek home ownership. That is what she did. She gives credit to many who helped her along the way but she tells of her determination to make a change because she knew her own suffering.

Her life today is about helping other women find a new start, a new life, post prison life. She knew her own suffering and that experience gave her the compassion she needed to share the home she found with others. Her organization is called A New Way Of Life and she has more applicants than she can accommodate. She is one story among many of those who have taught us what can happen when we are determined to allow our tendency toward mercy to be the guiding principle in our life.

We want whatever it is—altruism, love, forgiveness, sympathy, empathy to give us that “staying power” and keep us engaged in cultivating compassion. Mary Oliver's poem, “Wild Geese,” inspires us to know self-compassion and self-forgiveness so that we can be cultivate that part of us for others. May I share it?

*You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting-  
over and over again announcing your place  
in the family of things.  
- Mary Oliver*

May our place be a place of compassion in this hurting, wounded world that is ours. As we write and rewrite our stories into our own context, may we remember who God has called us to be in the family of things. Thank you, Congregational Church of Almaden Valley, for calling me to serve with you in the time we have shared. Thank you CCAV and The Episcopal Church in Almaden for the shared space to cultivate and create a place of compassion. As we continue our journeys, may we be compassionate as God is compassionate. May it be more than just a feeling; may it be a doing! Amen.

