

2019 07 14 – Adding Compassion

Luke 10:25-37

Jesus asked,

“Which of the three, in your opinion, was the neighbour to the traveller..?”

The answer came, “The one who showed compassion.”

Some of you may remember that last week I introduced a scripture passage from Paul’s letter to the Colossians where he wrote, “...clothe yourselves with heartfelt compassion, with kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Col 3:12) We referred to these qualities as our “capsule wardrobe.” Last week, as I emptied my suitcase, we reflected on the need for humility. Today, we continue with our series by focussing on compassion, another essential piece in our wardrobe.

So what is compassion? I searched the Internet this week and chose this explanation from Wikipedia:

Compassion motivates people to go out of their way to help the physical, mental, or emotional pains of another and themselves.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compassion>

So compassion is a feeling that arises when we are confronted with suffering. It is a feeling that makes us want to help.

In today’s story the Samaritan came upon a traveller who had been “beaten, stripped naked and left half-dead” by the side of the road. When he saw this

man's suffering, the Samaritan was "filled with compassion." He was moved to help, to alleviate his pain, so he dressed the traveller's wounds with oil and wine. The Samaritan went out of his way by putting the wounded person on a donkey, taking him to an inn, caring for him, and then, the next day, paying the innkeeper to look after the traveller until his return.

Compassion is about going out of our way to help someone who is hurting. Many of us are probably sitting here thinking, "Well of course I would help someone in trouble." But would we? Would we stop to pick up the hitchhiker on the road? Would we take the time to check on someone in a stopped car? Would we give money or food to a panhandler in the street? Would we visit our neighbour whose husband just died? Would we go to the hospital to spend time with someone who is sick? Would we go out of our way to welcome and support the newcomer in our city?

Or are we in too busy or in too much of a rush? Are we afraid of the unknown? Do we pass judgement on the other? Are we worried about what we are going to say? Are we not sure about how we are going to be received? Are we concerned about what our neighbours would think or say? There are so many reasons not to help.

In today's story the priest and the Levite both saw the traveller lying beside the road and passed by on the other side. A priest, in those days, was someone who presided over animal sacrifices in the temple and the Levite also had a role to play in temple life. Biblical scholars suggest that they both avoided the traveller

because of their Jewish laws. They knew that if they touched this half-dead person and he died in their arms then they would be unclean for seven days (Numbers 19:10b-13). For seven days they would be unable to perform their temple duties; they would be unable to do their jobs. Neither of them were willing to go that far “out of their way.”

Sometimes going “out of our way” can mean ignoring the rules, possibly even breaking the law. One of the things I struggle with in my role is church polity and when it’s appropriate to bend or break the rules in order to help someone who is suffering. I ran into this issue very early in my career. When I was a student minister in Alsask, SK, there was a woman in her eighties who wanted to be baptized. I had been taught that baptisms should take place in a church service with a congregation, but this woman had difficulty getting around and she hadn’t been to church for several years. I realized that she was in emotional, physical and spiritual pain and that I could help by ignoring that rule and performing the sacrament in her home. It was an amazing experience to baptize that wonderful woman at her kitchen table in the company of all seven of her adult children.

“Compassion motivates people to go out of their way to help the physical, mental, or emotional pain of another and themselves.”

In today’s story it is the Samaritan who demonstrated compassion to the traveller by the side of the road. It is important for us to realize that Samaritans were despised by the Jewish people. They were “the other:” the gays, the immigrants, the trans, the Muslim, the indigenous, the homeless people of Jesus’ day. They were the ones who lived on the margins. When Jesus said, “Then go and do the

same.” He was telling this expert in Jewish law, this privileged member of the dominant society, to be like the Samaritan, to be like the one he despised, to be like “the other.”

It’s interesting to note that if we look at the Latin root of the word compassion, we realize that its original meaning was to “suffer with.” True compassion ignores prejudice and hierarchy and help is offered from a place of mutuality and respect. The helper realizes that the situation could easily be reversed and that they are also receiving and growing through this interaction.

“Compassion motivates people to go out of their way to help the physical, mental, or emotional pain of another and themselves.”

One of the reasons I chose this description of compassion is because it included the last two words: “and themselves.” We also need to have compassion for ourselves when we are having a difficult time, when we fail, or when we notice something we don’t like about ourselves. Instead of just ignoring our own pain, we need to stop and tell ourselves, “This is really difficult right now.” And then we need we need to ask ourselves, “How can I comfort and care for myself in this moment?”

This is true even when what we are failing at is compassion itself. Having compassion for ourselves means that we honor and accept our own humanness. It is important to recognize that we will all suffer frustrations, losses will occur, we will make mistakes, bump up against our limitations, fall short of our ideals. The more we open our hearts to this reality, the more we are able to feel compassion

for ourselves and for our neighbours. <https://self-compassion.org/the-three-elements-of-self-compassion-2/>

Today's scripture reading began with the commandment to:

“love the Most High God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
with all your strength,
with all your mind,
and your neighbor as yourself.”

Of course, the good news is that God loves us too. The love of the Holy Mystery is unconditional and everlasting. It is the compassionate love of a God that suffers with us. It is love that we can draw on in order to find compassion for our neighbor and for ourselves.