

Reconnecting with Compassion

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Scripture: Matthew 15:32-39

The original lyrics for the spiritual “Gospel Plow,” written sometime in the 1800s, went something like this.

Well, I got my hands on the Gospel plow
And I wouldn't take nothin' for my journey now
Keep your hands on that plow of God.

Well, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
All those prophets are dead and gone
Keep your hands on that plow of God.

Sister Mary was bound in chains
And every link was Jesus' name
Keep your hands on that plow of God.

The song affirms the need to keep our hands on that plow of the love of God so that our rows are straight and long. Our hands on the plow are the connection between all that power of the animal that is pulling and that earth that is being turned over. It is our connection between earth and heaven. It's a form of prayer.

In 1965 a civil rights activist named Alice Wine took this old spiritual and made some changes, so the song became:

Paul and Silas bound in jail
Had no money to go their bail
Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on.

Paul and Silas thought they was lost.
Dungeon shook and the chains come off
Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on.

Freedom's name is mighty sweet.
Black and white are gonna meet
Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on.

Hold on, Hold on.
Keep your eyes on the prize.
Hold on.

So the image of the plow in the soil becomes a little richer, digs a little deeper into earth, into struggling love. There is the need to hold onto the plow because it is more difficult to move against hardened hearts than hardened earth. And to keep going, you will have to keep your eyes on the prize of freedom, like it was a scripture verse, like it was a promise for the Creator herself.

If there's anything that God has as an agenda for, it's setting suffering people free. Yahweh brings the people out of "Egypt," which is understood in the Bible as "a narrow place," into a "broad and spacious place," flowing with milk and honey. God brings us out of suffering and oppression to live in a land of sustainable peace. If a relationship is abusive or oppressive, God's way is clear: God wants us out of there. God wants us to be free.

The story of the Exodus is about God's desire to free us from all sorts of "narrow places" in our lives: political and economic injustice, racism, abusive relationships, addictions, and coercive religion – anything that diminishes life. God judges the forces of oppression, and is not polite about it. The trick is, God doesn't just say a word and suddenly we're free. We have to get up and go into the wilderness, into the unknown, into segregation, into Selma, into homophobia in Stonewall and Orlando, and into religious persecution in the United States.

In his book *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, John Philip Newell shares the wisdom of Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Prize winner for her leadership of the non-violent movement for democracy in Burma. Her time in the wilderness was living for twenty-five years under house arrest. Suu Kyi describes the movement for change that she is leading as a "revolution of the Spirit." True power, she says, comes from within. What guides her is her meditation practice: one hour of silence each morning. What guides her is the way of compassion, being with the suffering. She has compassion for her people in their suffering, and she extends her compassion to the leaders of Burma's military dictatorship, saying, "If I had really started hating my captors I would have defeated myself." Hatred and fear blinds us to the wisdom in our soul. She is able to have compassion for these soldiers because her father was a soldier. In fact, her father was a leader in Burmese Liberation struggles against the British Empire and Japan. Aung San Suu Kyi chose to be a warrior like her father, but she chose what Mahatma Gandhi called *Satyagraha*, soul force, the long road of nonviolence and compassion.

John Philip Newell, a teacher of Celtic Spirituality, describes Suu Kyi's threefold path of compassion as: the courage to see, the courage to feel, and the courage to act. To live compassionately is to courageously see the connection between us and those who suffer, to allow ourselves to feel it, and then to take action for those who suffer. This could be an overwhelming task considering the amount of suffering there is in the world. But if we remember that Suu Kyi calls this courageous compassion "a revolution of the spirit," and if we remember how Jesus surrendered himself into the arms of John, and the waters of the Jordan River, and the love of God, and if we remember how Jesus went even deeper into trusting God, while seeing and feeling suffering in the forty days in the wilderness, we may be able to experience the courage of compassion, as a benediction rather than a burden, as a blessing rather than an obligation.

When we *want* to care for others, rather than *having* to care for others, we are freed from the narrow place of self-interest, and enter into the spaciousness of the Spirit, which Aung San Suu Kyi calls "profound simplicity." Jesus embodied this profound simplicity when he was able to respond to the hunger of the people and by blessing what they already had among them and inviting them to share it.

This is the Holy Loving Spirit that was with those courageous people who walked across the Edmund Pettis Bridge fifty-one years ago because they had their eyes on the prize of the right to vote. This is the Spirit that will be with everyone participating in the Women's March this coming weekend. Something else is being inaugurated this weekend, and it flies under the banner of "Peace Is Flowing." Peace is flowing like a river, flowing out of you and me, flowing out into the desert, setting all the captives free.

The new words to "Gospel Plow" that Alice Wine wrote in 1965 grew as people added their own lines to the song, based upon their own experience

Only chain that a man can stand,
That's the chain of hand in hand
Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on.

I gonna board that big Greyhound,
Carry the love from town to town
Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on.

Even in situations that we can't escape, God draws us toward freedom. Even in prison, Nelson Mandela was a free man. He was free of his captor's fear and their narrow mindset and narrow view of the future. The promise of Exodus is not that we will succeed, soon or forever, but that freedom is as basic to God's creation as are hydrogen and helium. All will be well, eventually. Ask and you shall receive, eventually. We shall overcome, eventually, if we keep our eyes on the prize and our feet on the ground and take the responsibility of citizenship in the nation and citizenship in the beloved community seriously, graciously, as a covenant, a vow based on a dream. Hold on.

This keeping his eyes on the prize of compassion gave Jesus, a Galilean tradesman, the courage and the righteous anger to stand at the temple steps and say to the moneychangers

This is wrong and must be stopped.
No more exploitation of the poor.
No more turning the holy place into a market of commercialism.
Everywhere is holy in the sight of the Creator.
Everyone is a temple of the Creator's love.
God's love is given freely to everyone.

I can't help thinking about how this passage of the money-changers extorting the poor on the steps of the Temple applies not just to a particular temple or Holy Land, but also to earth herself. How have the moneychangers turned the beauty of the earth and all of its abundant resources from what should be a birthright, an earthright, for all people and all creation, into a commodity that serves the one percent? The temple that is being destroyed today is our own Mother Earth. How can some people be so corrupted by greed that they would have the blatant audacity to deny science, deny climate change, and deny their own grandchildren their birthright? It's as if their banner is "Bring back the Dark Ages."

I am grateful for the compassion of so many faith communities and organizations who provide us with ways to see, feel, and want to take action for the well-being of this blue boat home that is the most wonderful gift of the Creator.

Two of my favorite verses in “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize” are these:

The only thing we did wrong,
Stayed in the wilderness a little too long
Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on.

The only thing we did right
Was to organize and fight
Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on.

Fight. Stand up. Stop wandering. You see what you need to do. Remember your higher purpose. If you say “Yes, we can!” Then say “Yes, we are! Yes, we are doing something, however small, because we trust that it’s profound simplicity that changes the world.”

That old gospel song, “Gospel Plow,” went through some changes during the Civil Rights Movement. It was the same spirit moving and guiding, but the people find new words for new times.

As I was thinking about the words to these songs, how they changed, and how they kept their eyes on the prize of the original vision of the song, I thought about this congregation at this time in your history. You have a great old song within you. How might the words change for these times we are living in now? You have a beautiful sanctuary on the top of Rock Hill Drive. How might the structure be changed for these times we are living in now? You have a beautiful view, and I wonder what your vision is. I wonder what people see when they look up the hill. Where do they see you in this community, knowing that you are a part of Community Congregational Church? What would make them want to come up the hill?

Can you set your eyes on the prize and keep your hands on the gospel plow and sing a song of extravagant welcome? Can you sing, even in the midst of this time of transition “We are not afraid”? We are willing to trust that we will be nurtured and guided, learning what we need to learn so we can enter into a broad and spacious place that will welcome so much more than a new minister, but also a new beginning for this united and uniting church that has such a unique voice to raise in this beautiful Bay Area.

The words to “Gospel Plow” changed as the people sang it, but the spirit remained the same. How is Community Congregational Church in Tiburon-Belvedere, United Church of Christ, going to let the song of this church change even as the spirit remains the same?

How?
Hold on.
Hold onto the courage to see.
Hold onto the courage to feel.
Hold onto the courage to act, with profound simplicity.
And don’t stop from singing old songs in new ways,
And new songs with the same Spirit.

