

“Together in Compassion”

Rev. David Gregory

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The Good Samaritan

First reading

*An excerpt from the Charter for Compassion
by Karen Armstrong*

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and put another there, and to honor the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

Scripture readings

Psalm 133 (New Revised Standard Version – adapted)

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there is ordained blessing, life forevermore.

Matthew 7:12 (New Revised Standard Version)

In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

I'd like to begin this morning by wishing you a Happy Easter. Wait! That was last week! Or was it? We tend to think of Easter as a single date on the calendar that we celebrate once a year. It is that, but it is also more than that. In traditional Christian practice, Easter is a season. In the same way that Advent leads us to Christmas which leads us to Epiphany, Lent leads us to Easter, which leads us to Pentecost, which this year is on the 20th of May. So, in a sense, Easter will continue for the next six weeks.

Here at CCC we're not big followers of liturgical calendars, and I'm not suggesting that we start now. I only share these things to help us consider some of the subconscious rhythms that inform our journey together, and — not unlike the moon cycles, or the next solstice or equinox — they become a curriculum of spiritual understandings and practices. Each time they come around we get to dig the familiar wells a bit deeper than last time.

As we consider the next installment of the Easter story, I'd like to think about the women and men who were friends and followers of Jesus of Nazareth, and how, once these momentous, life-changing events had taken place, might have asked one another "What now?" As a community of Spirit, we have been through some momentous changes this year, and now that so much of it is in place, we might well ask each other, "What do we do now?" Asking this question moves us toward our green, growing edge, the place we really want to inhabit, where we are always moving forward and never fully arriving. To view it any other way only serves nostalgia and stagnation.

Together we are dreaming new dreams, sharing a new vision, and taking as our guiding principle the fact that our best days as a congregation are in front of us. We are in this together, and for the next six weeks we will experience what it means to be "together in Spirit," inextricably linked by common goals and common goods that define who we are as a spiritual community. And one of those common goods is compassion, a quality that seems missing from our culture, even though there is an unlimited supply. Compassion, these days, can be so foreign to our discourse that it feels remote and complicated, but it's really very simple. To feel compassion is to "suffer alongside," to see another person's pain, to feel it, and then to act upon that feeling.

I chose for the first reading today an excerpt from the Charter of Compassion, penned about a decade ago by religious historian Karen Armstrong. The Charter has given rise to a global movement called the Campaign for Compassionate Communities. If you are like me, you are hungry these days for communications that are positive, nourishing, and life-giving. And if you are particularly in need of something that feels really good to hear, then go on line and find the TED Talk by Karen Armstrong on compassion. In it she highlights the fact that what we have come to think of as the "Golden Rule" taken from the Sermon on the Mount is actually a core idea of every major world religion, and predates Jesus of Nazareth by at least five or six centuries.

It matters not if you are Hindu, Buddhist, or Sikh, Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, Quaker, Baptist, or Unitarian. Treating others the way you wish to be treated is a universal statement of compassion which has the power to pull the entire human race together in a single thread. But though it is simple to understand, it can be a little difficult to practice. For example, John Philip Newell's 2014 book *The Rebirthing of God* tells the story of a young man named Ben who traveled from Minnesota to Iona Abbey in Scotland some years ago to attend the first Pilgrimage for Change.

Ben and his wife had made their home in one of the most violent, crime-ridden areas of Minneapolis in response to what they felt was their call to help transform the neighborhood. When they moved there, it was just the two of them, but by now they had two children, ages two and four. There had recently been a shooting nearby and a violent break-in at the house across the street. They were beginning to think it was time to move out into the suburbs for the safety of their little children. But on the pilgrimage at Iona, Newell writes that Ben began to see “the preciousness of his own children in the eyes of every child in the neighborhood,” that “something of his sacred instinct as a father expanded to include them as well. “This,” Newell says, “is seeing with compassion.” And in today’s confession, I will say I’m not sure I’m there yet.

Newell also tells the story of Suu Kyi, the Burmese author, diplomat and politician who won a Nobel Prize in 1991. Her party finally came to power in 2015, but before that, she spent 25 years under house arrest, and was known as Burma’s Gandhi. While demonstrating her great concern toward her people in their suffering, her practice of compassion has also extended to the military dictatorship that wronged her, her family, and the nation. Her comment was, “If I had really started hating my captors, I would have defeated myself.” Compassion toward her enemies has opened her to a lot of criticism from the activists who surround her or follow her work. After all, it is counter-intuitive to “love your enemies or to pray for those who spitefully use you,” as Jesus appears to have taught. To some, it appears that compassionate people are soft, to the point of being run over by those who would bully them into submission. I have great admiration for that kind of compassion, but I must confess that I don’t think I’m there yet.

Then there is Martin Luther King whose model of non-violence could not hold back the flood of violence that erupted immediately after his assassination 50 years ago. There was no more patience on the part of many African Americans in those days. The struggle for civil rights was just that, a struggle. Unfortunately it still is, and for that reason, I struggle to find compassion in my soul for those who seek to turn back the clock.

You see, I love Karen Armstrong’s Charter for Compassion, but when she says that I need “to honor the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect,” I can go with her for a good long distance, until I come up against a white supremacist, or the leader of the NRA. I can show lots of compassion toward society’s most vulnerable; it’s the invulnerable that I have trouble with. So, when I invite you to join me as a congregation in the practice of compassion, or the application of the Golden Rule, I’m not asking you to give a mental assent to the ideals of world religion. What I’m really asking is that you join me in an honest search of our own souls, exploring the shadows as well as the light, exposing our own hatreds and prejudices and bringing them into the open, so that we can do something to move ourselves forward.

If you have not read Arlie Hochschild’s book *Strangers in Their Own Land*, I invite you to do so and join me at the green, growing edge of who we are as a spiritual community. It won’t be easy, but it will be good.

Amen.