



## Lenten Devotional 2007

---

First Congregational Church of Berkeley  
United Church of Christ

*Here we see what compassion means. It is not a bending toward the under privileged from a privileged position; it is not a reaching out from on high to those who are less fortunate below; it is not a gesture of sympathy or pity for those who fail to make it in the upward pull. On the contrary, compassion means going directly to those people and places where suffering is most acute and building a home there.*

-Henri Nouwen

*The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members, a heart of grace and a soul generated by love.*

-Coretta Scott King

*Filled  
With  
Compassion*

*Lenten Devotional 2007*

*Contributed by members of  
First Congregational Church of Berkeley  
United Church of Christ*

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17, Psalm 51:1-17, 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10,  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

YOU CAN'T COVER THIS UP!

It was in 1986, I attended my first Ash Wednesday Service, while serving as the Minister of Youth and Neighborhood Ministries at Hartford Memorial Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan. In the background, the hymn, "Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone," was playing as I stood before my pastor, the Rev. Dr. Charles G. Adams. He pressed his thumb into the ashes, made the sign of the cross on my forehead, and uttered to me the words, "From dust thou art, and to dust thou shall return." I was a bit stunned, and said to myself, "That sho' was cold, to tell me that I'm 'dust' and that I will return to the 'dust' particularly when I'm dressed and covered so finely in my black robe and clergy drag."

How easy it is for us to hide, dress and cover up the places within us that make us vulnerable, afraid, and perhaps cover up the compassion that might call us to acknowledge the fragility and fear in our world. Some of us might like Jesus' instructions on fasting in Matthew 6:17-18, and would gladly run out and buy oil and skin cream for our faces, so as not to look too sullen and "dismal" when others see us in the congregation. Yes, the cosmetic companies are rich today because of people who are passionate about buying anti-aging skin care products. I recently purchased skin care products for men. Brothers, it takes away our wrinkles, and will make your face as smooth as a baby's bottom. Yet, beneath all our covering up, none of us can hide from the difficulties in life that we see and feel. As fragile as the days of gloom described in Joel 2:1-12, we experience the same gloom, in our personal lives and in the news reports on war, hunger, racial conflict, and human strife, through which the breath of the Spirit utters, "Return to me!" Be filled with compassion! Allow Lent to carry you to a place of vulnerability with others, to a sacred home of return.

Psalm 37:1-18, John 1:29-34

We know that we want to be compassionate – to nurture compassion and to become a being with an open heart, a heart that sees love and gives love unconditionally. But how does one enact a shift from experiencing short and abrupt “moments” of compassion to achieving the sweet quietude of a full and compassionate heart? Psalm 37 provides, in a close reading, some clues that might aid that process. Verse one reminds the reader to refrain from forming attachments to the behavior of others, to not worry about other people’s stories – instead, stay quietly focused upon one’s trust in God. In my translation the Psalmist envisions this as the dawn...imagine the deep hues of pink and coral as they are slowly enhanced by the pale gold spilling over the crest of an eastern hilltop.

Verse seven encourages the reader to be still and wait. In fact, much of Psalm 37 seeks to help the reader remain quietly undisturbed, repeatedly using verbs or phrases of stillness like “dwelling” and “inheriting the land.” The reader is urged to be mindful and not be swayed by the illusions of strength which can be the hallmark of what are actually empty and misdirected energies of aggression and darkness. The compassionate heart is, thus, an island of peace in any storm. Love has a weight – it is not a story but rather a substance. Those who nurture compassion bring peace wherever they go.

Consider the 37th verse of Psalm 37, “there is a future for the person of peace.” May you nurture compassion, do not allow your attention to be pulled astray by stories of fear and aggression. Be still, feel the peace and sweet strength of dawn as it can and will fill your heart.

Amen.

Friday, February 23

Louise Halsey/Jim Coates

Psalm 31, John 1:35-42

As Mary Mackenzie says in *Peaceful Living: Daily Meditations for Living with Love, Healing and Compassion*, we are all naturally compassionate. Our desire to give and receive compassion is innate.

While we carry the intention of being compassionate, we are not always successful. Consciously choosing to be compassionate is a way to connect with others, to connect with ourselves, and feels like coming home.

Recently married, we continue to create a home together with the desire to share our love with our teenage daughters, grown sons, Ora (our 90-year old adopted mom, who lives upstairs), each other, our many family members, friends and co-workers. Sometimes we struggle with being loving and compassionate, especially at the end of a long day filled with dinner, dishes, homework, bills and other daily responsibilities. We behave or we observe others behaving in ways that we don't particularly enjoy.

As we become aware of these behaviors, this is the point at which we can make the conscious choice to act with compassion – or not.

As the Dalai Lama states in *The Path to Tranquility*,

With genuine love and compassion, another person's appearance or behavior has no effect on your attitude. Real compassion comes from seeing the other's suffering. You feel a sense of responsibility, and you want to do something for him or her.

Ideally, we choose to act compassionately. However, when we aren't as successful as we hope to be, we can still have compassion for ourselves. Finding that compassion can come from within us or from the support of others. It is this ongoing desire to live from a place of love and compassion that inspires us.

Psalm 30, John 1:43-51

PHOTOGRAPH

A Christmas card comes from my cousin Bill (actually my mother's cousin, so my first cousin once removed). I open it and out slides a photograph. The card says,

"The enclosed photograph was taken July 4, 1922. My mother Phoebe, your grandmother Louise, your mother Phoebe Ann and I are in the picture."

In the photo, two women are standing by a small bridge. A boy of seven and a toddler girl stand in front of them. The girl is my mother. She is half turned away from the camera, fingers in her mouth, her eyes anxious. Everyone else is smiling and relaxed. The women wear large flowered hats and dresses, my grandmother's belted a little loosely and sagging in front. I guess she is pregnant with my uncle John. One hand is reaching for my mother. The other hand holds some kind of harness she is using to restrain her. Her face is kind, but I think she also looks tired. A hot summer outing with a toddler while pregnant would explain it, but I wonder if she is feeling the early effects of the cancer that killed her three years later.

I have carried the sadness of that early death ever since I can remember. My mother in that picture is a toddler already uncomfortable with her world. I know that look. I have seen it on the faces of my small students. Some children approach life with confidence, and others do not. My mother lacked the resilience to recover from the loss of her mother, whose death wounded her beyond healing. My grandmother was the one person in the world who loved and understood my mother, and I see it in the picture – one hand for comfort, the other for protection. What anguish it must have caused for her to know she must die and leave behind her two tiny and vulnerable children.

Aunt Phoebe took care of my mother often in those early years, but there was a strange absence of affection between them. Was Aunt Phoebe unable to form a bond with that shy and anxious child, so devastated by her mother's death? And where is my grandfather in this story? Why was he unable to help his daughter heal from her loss?

My grandmother's death throws my comfortable faith into confusion. Why would a compassionate God wreak such havoc in the lives of these good people? This is an old question; even Job was not the first to ask why humans suffer. God's answer to Job: "Where were you when I created the earth?" shifts the question away from our personal lives and into the vastness of space and time. I may never have answers to my questions.

As C.S. Lewis said, "That is their story." I am left with the challenge to find a God of compassion in such a universe.

If we believe that God is everywhere, then it must be true that God is found in the midst of suffering. "Lo, I am with you always" are words of comfort and compassion. If we look for God in the midst of our pain, we will find God. God does not give us a life free of suffering, but God promises to be there with us, "even unto the ends of the earth."

Sunday, February 25

Paul Tomasiello

Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16,  
Romans 10:8b-13, Luke 4:1-13

For me the three passages in this week's scripture readings make the connection between faith, charity and hope. In Deuteronomy, we hear God's command to be faithful by giving of the first fruits. We learn that doing so is more than a duty; it is a gesture of praise and thanksgiving for all that has been given and all that will be given.

But what does giving have to do with faith? When I was growing up, I witnessed many times how giving would return blessings that often seemed like miracles. My mother would make anonymous gifts to strangers or acquaintances that were in need. I remember this making me nervous, knowing that it was usually a sacrifice. She would explain to me that it was not just an act of charity, but also of faith – faith that God would provide for our needs. The blessings that followed sometimes came in the form of an unexpected check in the mail for an insurance rebate, or the discovery of a sale price on something we needed to buy. It seemed like magic, and created a feeling that God was present and at work in our lives.

I still feel a strong connection between the practice of giving and the sense of knowing that "all things work together for good, to those who love Christ and are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). Faithful giving not only keeps us grateful for what we have, but it also fuels hope for a better world by enabling those who are in need to be blessed. The cheerful giver has answered God's call and is comforted, "sitting in God's shadow" as David puts it in the Psalm. The words "In God we trust" are printed on our U.S. currency, and whether or not we believe they should be there, perhaps they can serve as a reminder that our giving reflects a trust that God will provide for us and for those who have a more urgent need for physical or spiritual quenching.

Psalm 41, John 2:1-12

HARD COMPASSION

In my work there is little room for compassion. Working with whistleblowers to expose white collar fraud against the federal government is a bare-knuckled endeavor. The corporations that are caught by the fraud, and the government that does not want to admit the fraud, strike back hard. It is them and us. It becomes a game of chicken, going eyeball to eyeball to see who blinks first. Exposing and publicizing the fraud is one of the only tools that we have against hardball power derived from making large profits off the war in Iraq.

And there is surprisingly little compassion for the whistleblower, the person who does the right thing to come forward to find out that the government and, unfortunately, sometimes the public, wants to kill the messenger. This is where my well of compassion has to come in. I have been an emotional caregiver of sorts to all types of people who did the right thing only to find that their jobs are gone, their friends are gone, and often even their marriages are gone. The Psalm listed today could be renamed the "Psalm of the Whistleblower"; it strengthens one against the enemies that slander them.

But my compassion for the whistleblower is easy. My challenge is to have compassion for the powerful, who on rare occasions are beaten or ruined by our exposés. I am usually so angry at what they try to do to the truth tellers but, I work in my soul to have compassion for them when they are exposed. Most are unrepentant, but I work hard on my compassion for them and their families when trouble rocks their powerful world. This is my work on compassion: rejoice for justice but show compassion for the wrongdoers in their time of pain.

Psalm 45, John 2:13-22

Psalm 45 - Ode to Royal Wedding

John 2:13-22-- Story of Jesus Turning Over Tables and Chasing Moneychangers Out of the Temple.

I read Psalm 45 (per my Lectionary assignment) and wondered who slipped this unfamiliar text into my Bible? I'm well acquainted with the next Psalm about longing for the experience of God's presence "like a deer pants after flowing streams." Psalm 46 speaks loads of compassion to me, and I've used it often as healthcare chaplain in working with folk feeling absence of God's presence. Where do I find the compassion in Psalm 45? Mine is kindled for the bride-to-be who's instructed to forget her people. Whose main thing to look forward to from here on out is that the king will desire her beauty and she will give him sons, and rich rulers will give her expensive presents. I'm sure that in her time and context it represented a home run moment and a stellar achievement and perhaps she found great fulfillment. But for me it falls flat.

When I read the story of Jesus in the temple at his final Passover before his crucifixion, I can't help feeling compassion for all the unsuspecting business people. Maybe they were charging exorbitant prices, but, hey – everyone's got to make a living! Jesus came in with a whip and poured out their money and flipped their tables over. I try to imagine any Christian leader I know (progressive or otherwise) walking into the local mall at Christmas season or, better yet, into the Large Assembly room at FCCB during the Advent gifts fair – and knocking over registers and chucking merchandise out onto the sidewalk. I imagine they'd be arrested in a heartbeat.

These stories do cause me to pause at the breadth of human emotion and experience portrayed in Scripture. Jesus got angry (and took it out on others' property!). The royal wedding Psalm emphasizes the physical beauty and material wealth and political power of this couple getting married. The scriptures pretty much lay it all out there: murder, lust, grief, devotion, deliverance, joy, fulfillment, envy, self-sacrifice, friendship – and I find that reassuring and normalizing. As a young person growing up with the Baptist emphasis on the central importance of the Biblical witness, reading these stories of imperfect persons struggling with situations (which would be at home on any talk-show or movie of the week) helped me to have compassion for my own struggles and intense emotions and questionable responses and for those of others. Human condition? God knows – it's in the Book.

Psalm 119:49-72, John 2:23-3:15

Often we have important things to say to others and we are not heard. We may want to share our stories of oppression or trauma, or to educate people about environmental and political issues. Our goals may be to inform, to galvanize support, or to break a harmful silence, but so often these things – especially if they are hard to hear – fall on deaf ears. Jesus says, “I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?” (John 3:12). That’s the problem, isn’t it? Sometimes information is so scary that we don’t want to believe it – the knowledge makes us feel helpless, and we would rather pretend it’s not true than to face our responsibility to change. I think this is true about so many issues we face today: global warming, child abuse statistics, U.S. sponsored torture, poverty in our backyards...the list could go on and on.

What issues cause you to shut down, preferring to not believe in them rather than face the fear and helplessness that might come from understanding their reality? In what ways might that unbelief spill over into your spiritual life?

Just as so many of the problems in our world today seem too frightening to believe, the Gospel can seem too wonderful to believe – scary too, perhaps, to believe that God actually loves you unconditionally. You! For many of us, the negative messages that the world gives us are easier to believe than the positive message of Jesus, and we find it harder to have compassion for ourselves than for others.

The good news I want to share with you today is that life is not a zero-sum game! You can open your eyes to the bad things and still see the good, and I hope you will see that compassion is something that never runs out – there is enough for all of us.

Thursday, March 1

Jennifer Carlson

Psalm 50, John 3:16-21

Wow! The “big verse” of the Bible.

One of the reasons that we believe as we do: that Christ suffered and died for us on the Cross so long ago. But, as with all things, there is more to this verse than meets the eye. God saved the world through His son, Jesus. That speaks to me as a parent. Our children, all children, are the most precious gift we have on Earth. Through our devotion to them, we learn to care more for someone else than we do for ourselves. We are, at once, elevated to a higher plane by our selflessness (like Jesus) and reminded that we are only as good as our actions, however small, reflect.

To sacrifice is to instantly connect to God's grace and goodness. And we can do it every day, by living with compassion.

Friday, March 2

Carolyn Ocheltree

Psalm 40, John 3:22-36

On Thursday, January 4, 2007, Madam Nancy Pelosi, with gavel in hand, took control of the House of Representatives in our nation's capitol and declared to the world:

It is an historic moment for the Congress and an historic moment for the women of the country. It is a moment for which we have waited 200 years. Never losing faith, we waited through many years of struggle to achieve our rights.

As I watched the amazing moments of this occasion on TV, my heart was so deeply touched. With the children in the House gathered around her on the rostrum, Speaker Pelosi sang out a new song, "For these children, for all the American children, the House will come to order."

In our Old Testament reading today, the Psalmist lifts up poignant prayers of thanksgiving for the Lord who has brought compassionate deliverance. These prayers so greatly resonate with our new Speaker's spirit.

Great is the Lord for he has compassionately heard our cry as we waited patiently nurturing our faith.

Great is the Lord for he will lift us up upon a rock and put a new song in our mouth. Here I am. I delight to do your will.

As we meditate upon these spiritual affirmations, may we be comforted as we patiently wait for reconciliation in our individual lives. May we trust in Him who so deeply loves us and who will compassionately hear our cries. He will deliver us and put a new song in our hearts.

Saturday, March 3

Kathryn Stambaugh

Psalm 55, John 4:1-26

The familiar words of the Prayer of St. Francis were very special to my father-in-law, Salvatore Mazzotta. I share them with you now in loving memory of him.

Lord make me an instrument of Thy peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me show love.  
Where there is injury, pardon.  
Where there is doubt, faith.  
Where there is despair, hope.  
Where there is darkness, light.  
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Sunday, March 4

Wilfred Ward

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18, Psalm 27,  
Philippians 3:17-4:1, Luke 13:31-35

In W. B. Yeats's play "The Cat and the Moon," two men seek healing at a saint's well they have been told is one hundred steps down the road. The blind man carries the lame and they count the steps. They reach the well but see no one. A voice asks, "Will you be healed or will you be blessed?"

The blind man chooses healing. The lame man is more curious. He is told that to be blessed means that his name will be entered into the roster of saints in heaven and that on earth he will have the companionship of the saint. He thinks that being enrolled with the saints would be the most wonderful thing imaginable, besides having the saint's companionship, so he chooses to be blessed.

The consequences are that the formerly blind man sees that the lame man has killed his sheep and lied about it, so beats him severely. The saint, though offering no protection, has become a congenial companion, though visible only to the lame man.

\* \* \*

Outside Gaylord's Restaurant at the end of our block, an unused newspaper vending locker has a sign: "CHRISTIANITY IS STUPID" followed by the usual image of a heart as a signature. The sentiment has Biblical authority: "...our knowledge is imperfect...now we see in a mirror dimly." A more tactful way of putting it would be, "CHRISTIANITY IS HUMAN." Divine?

Blessings to all, and peace!

Monday, March 5

Patty Contaxis

Psalm 56, John 4:27-42

During my sophomore year in high school, certain feelings were mounting inside me. So much emotional pressure built up that I began to fear someone might see my thoughts. My rational mind knew this could not be, but my irrational mind seemed to be growing more wild.

There was no one I could talk to, and so I took up a private study. It began during lunch and other free periods, but soon I was skipping classes to spend time in the library, where I combed the stacks, reading indexes of psychology books for references to homosexuality.

You can imagine what kind of information was available in a suburban high school library circa 1971. I waded through many references to perversion, narcissism, regression and such. And everything was about male homosexuality. There was not one positive image in all I found. Still, I kept searching, studying, so great was my need.

Generally, I perused books in the stacks, leaning casually against bookshelves of other subjects, hoping to disguise my quest. Occasionally, I approached the circulation desk to check out one book or another. The school librarian, Mary Jo Anderson, gray-haired, reserved, even-handed with all students, always greeted me politely and stamped a return date in my book. I have a strong visual image of her, so I must have looked at her, but my memory of checking out those books is of looking down, wanting to disappear, wondering if she knew why I wanted such books and if I would be chastised at some point. Hauled into the principal's office. Thrown out of the school.

One morning, while I slid yet another furtive selection across the circulation desk, Mary Jo Anderson reached under the countertop and added a second book to my pile. As she stamped them both with return dates she said, "I think you'll find this one more helpful, dear."

That was thirty-five years ago. As I write this Lenten piece, Maura reads over my shoulder. We will celebrate our twenty-fifth anniversary this year. We have a child, a home, a church community, ailing parents, good friends. "What's amazing to me," she says, "is that Mary Jo Anderson may not even remember this. Maybe she does, or maybe not. She did this one thing, at one time in her life, which meant the world to you, and she may not even know."

Mary Jo Anderson was a brave woman. Can you imagine slipping a book to a teenager – without parental consent, in the context of a public school – affirming their sexuality? About twenty years ago, I heard that she had died. How many times we touch another's life, not even knowing the difference we make.

Tuesday, March 6

Carmelle Knudsen

Psalm 61, John 4:43-54

### FILLED WITH COMPASSION

John 4:43-54: Healing of Gentile military officer's son

It seems to me that most if not all of the stories of Jesus' healings are because Jesus was filled with compassion. Here a Gentile military officer who, when his son was dying, walks over a day to find Jesus. He begs Jesus to come to his home and heal his son. I think Jesus saw and felt the love this man had for his child and understood how much he wanted him to live, to have life. So Jesus heals him from afar and tells the man to return home. Once the officer is back home, he discovers that his child became better at the same time as the man was in Jesus' company. Out of this experience the man and his whole household believed.

Can you remember a time when you did something out of compassion that totally changed the way the other related to life, or to you?

For me it was being a foster parent. Helping a child get the right start in life was motivated by the huge need in Alameda County for foster parents. And I wanted to make a difference in another person's life. The two infants I had were too young to know me the rest of their lives, but the teenager has become a very responsible, loving parent who is still connected. I don't get all the credit, but because I believed in both God and Rob, we were both changed forever.

Let us pray. Dear God, fill us with compassion, so that your world can more fully reflect your light and love. Amen

Psalm 72, John 5:1-18

COMPASSION IS AN EVERYDAY GOAL

These readings offer contrasting experiences of compassion. Psalm 72 praises the king because of his compassion and protection of the poor and needy:

For he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him  
who has no helper.  
He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the  
lives of the needy.  
From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and  
precious is their blood in his sight.

The passage from John shows a compassionate Jesus on the Sabbath caring for a man who cannot walk. Jesus asks the man if he wants to be healed and then orders him to “rise, pick up your pallet and walk”. The man does so and shares his amazement as well as Jesus name to those who ask how he was healed. There is no compassion, however, from the Jews who felt that Jesus was violating their religious laws. They cannot forgive him from doing good because it is on the Sabbath and because Jesus called God his Father.

Each of us is wise to reflect on our judgments and reactions to the people and situations we encounter each day. When we are asked to respond to our partners, our children, our colleagues, or neighbors or total strangers, what is the place we draw on? Do we think, speak and act with compassion? Laws are important; we’d be in trouble without them. But we also need to include the understanding of human needs. This need for balance calls for exercise of the muscles of love and caring.

Question for thought for today: In understanding my reactions to the events of the day, to whom have I shown compassion and how have I shown it?

Thursday, March 8

Rebecca Suzanne

Psalm 71, John 5:19-29

I believe that when I am able to completely comprehend the sacred, upon my death my soul will be released to the light and will join the divine energy that fills our universe. It may be necessary for me to live many lives on Earth before that understanding fills me. With each death comes the opportunity for my soul's release or a judgment that may send me back to live a mortal life again. With each life comes the opportunity to do God's work on Earth and to live a life that embraces the sacred – through acts of peace, kindness and justice. I need only do the footwork, have faith, and let God take care of the rest.

Friday, March 9

Karyn Smith

Psalm 69, John 5:30-47

The writer of Psalm 69 cries out – not for compassion – but for God to rescue him and to punish his enemies. I don't believe that God rescues some and punishes others. I do believe that God, who is the source of all that is, must be filled with compassion. I believe that God's heart must ache to witness the unnecessary suffering we cause ourselves and our world.

I would like to be a more compassionate person, but I find I still need a lot of practice. I listen as friends share how hard life can get because of alcoholism, chronic pain or failing marriages. I read about unnecessary deaths and suffering in Iraq, Palestine, Darfur, East Oakland. I find that I'm filled with compassion for the moment, but then I begin to feel a heavy sadness and hopelessness. To escape these feelings, I switch gears and try to make things better; I make soup and cookies to deliver with a note or send a check to a worthy charity. I find that by keeping busy I am able to keep suffering at arm's length. But I sense that perhaps I'm missing out on some important truth – that compassion may involve opening oneself up to the world's pain, paying attention to the moments as they come, learning to sit with the heartache. I know that I can't fix other people's problems, but I could be a better companion to their suffering, a better listener who affirms that life is hard and there is much we need to learn. But I would have to slow down and really work at it and be compassionate with myself when I fall short, which is also hard.

Saturday, March 10

Julia Madore

Psalm 75, John 7:1-13

John 1:7-13 shows Jesus steadfastly following his inner-directed wisdom – his instructions from God – even if it makes others, even “the world,” hate him. I find this admirable because for much of my life I looked to others for direction and approval. Always getting lost and falling short! I have struggled with the fear of disappointing others, of rejection. Sometimes that fear has driven me to act against my better judgment or any judgment at all. I have in the past surrendered myself to some deformed exterior moral compass driven by fear.

Learning that God is inside of us has been the greatest comfort! My (attempted) daily practice is to connect to God and my spiritual self and then seek direction in the moment. When I am consciously connected to the Divine, when I am in the Light, then my choices more likely will be loving, intentional and ethical. From this place, deeply knowing that all is one, I can live with the disapproval from others. In this place I can also have compassion for myself and can listen to the rest of me that complains, is fearful. The comfort then is not the comfort of exterior approval but an inner confidence from the loving Spirit within.

If Jesus can tolerate the whole world hating him, surely I can tolerate a few people here and there angry for a bit now and then! I am learning to trust that if I am acting authentically and from a place of spiritual connection, others’ negativity is something to have compassion for, not something that has the power to change my actions or beliefs. This is being filled with compassion for myself.

Sunday, March 11

Andy Young

Isaiah 55:1-9, Psalm 63:1-8, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9

### COMPASSION

Through compassion, we rise above ourselves,  
we join the greater good, our shared humanity.

Compassion can be compelling,  
as when we face the innocent.

It can take deliberate effort,  
as when we watch the arrogant, the cruel.

It challenges.  
How far can we rise above ourselves,  
to aid the appealing?  
How do we confront the appalling?  
How much of ourselves do we find  
in both the best and worst around us.

Through compassion,  
do we see some part of God?

Psalm 80, John 7:14-36

As I returned from the Church Council meeting in January, I turned on PBS just in time to see a documentary on the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. that I had not seen before. I watched tapes of speeches and film clips from the last five years of Dr. King's remarkable ministry, including his speaking out against the war in Viet Nam from The Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967, a year before his death. The final speech included those unforgettable words, "I just want to do God's will." The powerful cadence of King's speech and the sheer power of his desire sent a cold shiver throughout my whole being.

Perhaps the season of Lent gives us time to ponder whether or not and how we want to "do God's will." I have asked myself what is God's will for my life over and over again through the years. It's a good way to get in touch with the call of the spirit in my life. Our Gospel text reminds us that Jesus was resolved to do the will of God, and it got him into a whole lot of trouble! Dr King certainly found himself in trouble in difficult and demanding times. How can we be filled with compassion and on fire with the will of God at the same time? Is there a conflict between wanting to do the strong will of God and living in the compassionate spirit? Years ago, theologian and priest Henri Nouwen commented that compassion for him meant an invitation to the passion of the spirit in one's own life. He said that "Come, passion" was a way to be active and engaged in the passions of life: peace and justice, love and forgiveness, joys and sorrows.

I know that one of the ways we begin to address the intentions of God for our world and the creation is with a heart of compassion and a desire for peace and justice. Many years ago one of my colleagues, who was then the director of a disarmament program, stopped by my office for a friendly chat. We talked about the state of the world, our concern for children, movies, cooking dinner. As he left, he smiled and said, "Thanks for the conversation, I am off to do God's will."

I've never forgotten the clear sense of joy and clarity in his face as he spoke those words. I am grateful to realize that aligning ourselves with the ordinary goodness of life is part of the journey in a life of compassion and justice. Our lives are brimming with the fullness of God's compassion and love for us. Let the fullness of our compassion be present in those every day encounters and in the work we are given.

Let's "be off to do God's will"!

Tuesday, March 13

Carol Ingram

Psalm 78:1-39, John 7:37-52

For inspiration on compassion, I skimmed a book I've enjoyed, *Destructive Emotions: How Can We Overcome Them?: A Scientific Dialogue with the Dalai Lama* by Daniel Goleman. As you might expect, there was a lot of thought provoking material on compassion. Both men are interested in teaching children to have good hearts, to learn how to manage their emotions. The Dalai Lama points out that we can grow in compassion the more we practice it. It changes the brain, and becomes increasingly automatic behavior. We learn it by practicing it.

My parents practiced compassion in their daily lives, though for a long time I didn't recognize it in my dad, a strict Army officer. I later realized that Dad was always doing things for others, whether through church or Meals on Wheels or Kiwanis or, even in his seventies, tutoring elementary school students or walking for cancer fundraisers. At 89, he fell and hit his head. For the last two years of his life, he didn't seem to be the same person. He would become confused, disoriented. When the doctor said it was time for him to go into hospice, my twin sister arranged for a hospice nurse to come meet with him, to introduce him to hospice. She came to his nursing home, and spent an hour going over with him how hospice worked, and what to expect. When she finished her explanation, she asked him if he had any questions. Dad, who had been lying on his bed, propped himself up on one elbow, turned to her and said, "Well, I don't know, I guess I could help out three afternoons a week." Helping others was second nature; compassion was automatic.

Wednesday, March 14

Sarah Jane Fernald

Psalm 119:97-120, John 8:12-20

### FILLED WITH COMPASSION

This past year has been, and continues to be, a very trying one for me as I have been sick with a mysterious stomach illness for seven months. It has been a time when my faith and trust in God have often been tested. But as always has been true in my life, God is there, encouraging me from every direction, if I just take time to be still and notice. One of the lessons I have been learning is about compassion – especially compassion for those with chronic illnesses, as I am now one of them. And, furthermore, compassion for myself, which can be the hardest kind. As a community of faith, the Congregational Church has been at the forefront of showing compassion for others in this world of much suffering. However, it is compassion for ourselves that can be easily forgotten.

Today's readings spoke of God's Laws – a difficult topic for me since I have been rebellious most of my life. But I realized it may indeed be another of God's "hints" to me that if I practice letting go more, and surrendering to God's love for me and care of me, my illness may get easier to bear and hopefully, God willing, eventually healed. The verses which spoke to me the most were from Psalm 119, verses 107 and 109, "I have suffered much, preserve my life, O Lord, according to your word...though I constantly take my life in my hands, I will not forget your law." And from John 8:14, "Jesus answered, 'Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going.'" If we can remember where we came from and where the roots of our strength lie, we will be better able to face the trials of life and be filled with compassion for others and ourselves. Amen.

Thursday, March 15

Mary Haake

Psalm 42, John 8:21-32

This season of Lent I am glad to know that we are all meditating on the Prodigal Son's return home. We know that feeling because we, too, have made so many mistakes. We, too, have been starving in a foreign land and felt that liberating turn towards repentance. We have journeyed and fallen to our knees and been amazed that we are forgiven and loved. We have found that message of grace at FCCB and we celebrate that miracle together.

I was delighted by today's Old Testament reading. Psalm 42 was one I encountered in my Journey Home faith exploration group six years ago. The poetry of that ancient text stirs us still. We hear the thirst of the Prodigal, our own thirst:

As a hart longs  
for flowing streams,  
so longs my soul  
for thee, O God.

The psalmist expresses what we so often feel, a baffling alienation from God:

My tears have been my food  
day and night,  
while men say to me continually,  
"Where is your God?"

Part of the answer to this despair comes from a process of upheaval, maybe what the Prodigal felt as he looked up to the stars from his lonely, miserable work feeding swine:

Deep calls to deep  
at the thunder of thy cataracts;  
all thy waves and thy billows  
have gone over me.

This Lent may we journey again to that overwhelming encounter with our fragility and need. May we realize in that chaotic mystery that we have abandoned God and that we can journey home. May we hear again the incredible gospel: that we are loved deeply, unconditionally, miraculously, and redemptively. May we carry that gospel to others. Amen.

Psalm 88, John 8:33-47

Psalm 88 is a cry of despair and anguish. Perhaps there is the hope that God will be moved to restore the speaker lest the prayers and praise be silenced by death. But one seeks elsewhere for reconciliation and redemption.

In John 8:33-47 Jesus offers truth and freedom in that truth, but his hearers want no part of being found wanting; they are proud of their heritage; their hearts are not open to receive Jesus' word.

O God, prepare my ear to hear your word and my heart to receive your word and let it bear fruit that glorifies you.

Let us pray with St. Francis of Assisi:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred . . . let me sow love  
Where there is injury . . . pardon  
Where there is doubt . . . faith  
Where there is despair . . . hope  
Where there is darkness . . . light  
Where there is sadness . . . joy  
Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
To be consoled . . . as to console  
To be understood . . . as to understand,  
To be loved . . . as to love  
For it is in giving . . . that we receive,  
It is in pardoning, that we are pardoned,  
It is in dying . . . that we are born to eternal life

Saturday, March 17

Stan Boghosian

Psalm 87, John 8:47-59

The reading today from John echoes the profound poetry of the first 13 verses of the Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God  
And the Word was God.

In the case of the passage for today, Jesus is engaged in another one of his encounters with Jews who are trying to discount him and his message. Their hearts are hardened to all that he represents, as he states with such stark language in his dialogue with them.

The opponents of Jesus are trying to discredit him, but when he claims that he existed before Abraham, they're ready to stone him! John wants us to know in no uncertain terms (throughout his Gospel) that Jesus is like no other man, that he is God, that he existed before time, and that he (the Word) represents the ability that we all have to make sense of or understand things.

I try to avoid the starkness of the stance of the Gospel by focusing on the person of Jesus. I'm not sure that it matters to me whether he was God. What he brings to my life as a Christian is an understanding about what matters to me: That I should love God (that is, all that has been given to us, truth, and spirit); and that being loving and compassionate and faithful will make my life most meaningful and fulfilling. In some profound way, Christ therefore brings to my life the ability to understand and derive meaning from Life.

I also understand that I can be like those who opposed Christ when I'm faithless or fearful.

Prayer: God, may I grow in love and compassion for the world and life that you've given to me, may I grow in faithfulness.

Amen

Sunday, March 18

Michele McGeoy

Joshua 5:9-12, Psalm 32, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

I have been putting a lot of energy (no pun intended) on the climate action ministry team. We want to inspire our members to be more conscious of how we impact the earth and to encourage changes in our living habits so that we take better care of God's wonderful creation.

After service at coffee hour we are met with delight when people find they can buy compact fluorescent light bulbs that are dirt cheap. But when I ask if they would be willing to take the "Carbon Challenge," I am sometimes met with a look as if I had asked them to donate their right arms for a good cause.

I'm relatively new at FCCB and I know there have been environmental groups that have come before this one that have done some great things and then eventually fizzled out. Our group is already starting to dwindle. So instead of taking the rejection personally, I've been reflecting on what we may be doing to illicit the negative responses.

Reading the story of the Prodigal Son, I wonder if we come across looking like the angry big brother. How much of me bragging about my solar panels is really to inspire you or simply lift myself up?

I don't want to be the angry brother complaining because he's been working so hard and never got a party. Sure I feel urgent about what is happening to the planet, but it's not going to make things better by being a righteous party pooper.

When anyone decides to use fluorescent light bulbs or trade in the SUV for a hybrid, or turn down the heat a notch or buy a new refrigerator or walk instead of drive – this is call for celebration. No need to kill a fatted calf, but let's rejoice!

Monday, March 19

Joan Uhrhammer

Psalm 89:1-18, John 6:1-15

THE TOUCH OF COMPASSION

Christian love finds its way into the lives of those receiving compassion.

Feeling marked,  
All alone,  
Rejection hurts,  
Voice off tone.

Adversity empowers  
Survival techniques.  
Rejection angers,  
Pain is unique.

Lonely fortitude  
Trusting God's love,  
Hoping to glimpse  
A Peaceful Dove.

Finding COMPASSION,  
Unexpected, warm,  
Brings on tears,  
Beauty is born!

Dealing with hurt,  
Sudden kindness, surprises;  
Touching the strings  
Of emotional disguises.

Soothing, calming  
Amidst the storm,  
COMPASSION sustains,  
Giving life form.

May God bless participants in the giving and receiving of compassion.

Tuesday, March 20

Bonnie Connor

Psalm 97, John 6:16-27

Jesus said to his followers at Capernaum, who had benefited the day before from the miracle of the loaves and fishes, “Do not work for food that goes bad, but work for food that endures for eternal life” (John 6: 27a). While he was not speaking directly about “vocation” that puts food on the table, our spiritual life informs all other aspects of our lives.

In the Buddhist tradition, right livelihood – that which brings true benefit to oneself and/or others – is the fifth factor in the Noble Eightfold Path. My “right livelihood” came to a screeching halt last fall when I, along with many of my co-workers, was laid off. In reality, the work environment and job duties had long since ceased to be ideal. Now, as I ponder my next vocation, I struggle with a familiar dilemma. Do I “sell everything” to have the financial freedom to pursue a path that captures my imagination, creativity, and heart – or pursue a path that supports my “lifestyle,” utilizes my skills and abilities, but is lacking in heart?

The Psalmist says, “Shame on all you who serve images, who pride themselves on their idols” (Psalm 97: 7). Worshipping the “idol” of maintaining my comfortable lifestyle has already strained me financially. Yet, uprooting myself, my pets, and my belongings feels both overwhelming and disruptive to any vocation pursuit. Jesus tells his followers that the food we seek “the Son of man will give you, for on him the Father, God himself, has set his seal” (John 6: 27b).

It would be wonderful if my new vocation and livelihood fell from the sky like “manna from heaven.” But, that isn’t going to happen. There are no shortcuts, no miracle cures. Spiritual discernment of my path must be accompanied by intention followed by action.

Wednesday, March 21

Psalm 101, John 6:27-40

## Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh talks about how listening is the first step towards peace.

*What do you say to people who are grief-stricken and enraged because they have lost loved ones in the terrorist attack [on 9/11]?* This is a question asked by Anne A. Simpkinson in an interview with Thich Nhat Hanh whose experiences during the Vietnam War led him to make this response:

I did lose my spiritual sons and daughters during the war when they were entering the fighting zone trying to save those under the bombs. Some were killed by war and some by murder due to the misunderstanding that they were supporting the other side. When I looked at the four slain corpses of my spiritual sons murdered in such a violent way, I suffered deeply. I understand the suffering of those who have lost beloved ones in this tragedy. In situations of great loss and grief, I had to find my calm in order to restore my lucidity and my heart of understanding and compassion. With the practice of deep looking, I realized that if we respond to cruelty with cruelty, injustice and suffering will only increase. When we learned of the bombing of the Bentra village in Vietnam, where 300,000 homes were destroyed, and the pilots told journalists that they had destroyed the village in order to save it, I was shocked, and [racked] with anger and grief. We practiced walking calmly and gently on the earth to bring back our calm mind and peaceful heart.

Although it is very challenging to maintain our openness in that moment, it is crucial that we not respond in any way until we have calmness and clarity with which to see the reality of the situation. We knew that to respond with violence and hatred would only damage ourselves and those around us. We practiced [so that we might] look deeply into the suffering of the people inflicting violence on us, to understand them more deeply and to understand ourselves more deeply. With this understanding we were able to produce compassion and to relieve our own suffering and that of the other side.

*(From the Ashes: A Spiritual Response to the Attack on America, November 2001, Beliefnet; Rodale Press)*

Thursday, March 22

Demetrhea Terrien

Psalm 73, John 6:41-51

In preparing for this reflection I chose to speak to a variety of acquaintances on the topic. To my surprise everyone had something to say about how compassion operated in their lives. It was integral, personal, confusing, commonplace, focused, and vibrant.

Compassion, from this group discussion, has healed some misunderstandings, bridged the gap of some critical judgmental interactions, and provided comfort during difficult times. It is an everyday experience that can be easily accessed by some, and rarely touches others.

My new position requires me to process requests on a variety of health issues, from the mundane to ones that are life threatening. I do not know these individuals, but every now and then I feel torn apart by their suffering and despair. During some of these encounters I know my words of support and kindness are but a small bit of help to them. That is all I can offer.

Psalm 102, John 6:52-59

BECOMING JESUS; BECOMING GOD  
John 6

<sup>53</sup> Jesus said to them, "What I'm about to tell you is true. You must eat the Son of Man's body and drink his blood. If you don't, you have no life in you. <sup>54</sup> Anyone who eats my body and drinks my blood has eternal life."

Ileana will tell you I'm a pretty literal guy, and she's right. A literal reading of this scripture is pretty hard for us today. Like so many scripture stories, when it is understood in the context of the time it was written, instead of today, the meaning is more clear, and it becomes empowering.

I like Charles Barkley's example in which a great unread book on the shelf remains external to its owner, but once read it becomes a part of the reader, "...the great lines remain in his memory. Now when he wants to he can take that wonder out from inside himself...and feed his mind and his heart upon it. Once the book was outside him. Now it is inside him and he can feed upon it."

So it is with Jesus. So long as our Jesus experience remains as the book on the shelf, He is external and unknown to us. Once we have taken Him inside us, then we can feed upon the life and strength and dynamic vitality that He gives to us. We will have changed our person and our life in the way that Christ intended.

<sup>57</sup> "The living Father sent me, and I live because of him. In the same way, those who feed on me will live because of me. <sup>58</sup> This is the bread that came down from heaven. Long ago your people ate manna and died. But those who feed on this bread will live forever."

Psalm 107:33-43, John 6:60-71

Dalai Lama has said the real role of religion is to fill the heart with compassion. This must be true. "You are familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend' and its unwritten companion 'Hate your enemy.' I am challenging that. Love your enemy. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. Live generously and graciously towards others, the way God lives toward you."<sup>1</sup>

Yet, when we act with compassion others might not respond in kind. Maya Angelou's words can help. She writes...

When I say I am a Christian  
I still feel the sting of pain,  
I have my share of heartaches  
So I call upon [God's] name.

When I say I am a Christian  
I'm not holier than thou,  
I'm just a simple sinner  
Who received God's good grace, somehow. <sup>2</sup>

Yes, with God's good grace you can be compassionate.

"Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love." Martin Luther King

If it is the case that less is more, then "Our prime purpose in this life is to help others. And if you can't help them, at least don't hurt them." Dalai Lama

1. Excerpt from Dr Stephen Lien, September 19, 2004, Brentwood Presbyterian Church, Sermon: "RISK IT! Compassion in a Hate-Filled Word"

2. Excerpt from the poem "I am a Christian" written by Maya Angelou (born Marguerite Johnson April 4, 1928). She is an American poet, memoirist, actress and an important figure in the American Civil Rights Movement.

Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126, Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8

### COMPASSION IN OUR LIVES

Compassion is the glue that binds together a community of caring individuals. It falls like water on the earth of our being and nourishes our essence. Groups can be held together by other means, but compassion is the most reliable since it brings joy to the giver and the receiver alike. It blesses and delights us as it raises our energy level. When another offers us a compassionate ear to hear our inner concerns, it reduces the impact and extent of the difficult feelings just to know that we are heard. When we listen fully to the issues that another is facing, our own troubles fall into perspective, and we feel expanded knowing that we have offered kindness and respect to another.

Many people have shown me great compassion here at FCCB. I know how wonderful it was to be heard and comforted in the grief I experienced after the death of my mother. Although the death of my father was a terrible shock and pain, I still had the job of caring for Mama in her time of need. Jim and I took her shopping, to church and meetings, and on a number of vacations, including travel to Europe. Offering her the support and solace of our presence and fellowship was healing for her and for us. Turning in my despair at her loss to my friends helped me to heal and grow beyond the feeling of loss to one of acceptance.

When we treat ourselves with compassion, we fill up our inner reserves enabling us to become better humans, creating a more compassionate self to give forth to others. If we give ourselves excellent nutrition, adequate exercise and fresh air, plenty of sleep, activities that strengthen and expand our minds, and time to reflect and meditate on our multitudinous blessings, we grow in the capacity to give. Jesus taught us the way of giving, the path of compassion, and as we follow His teachings, we live more and more in peace and joy.

Monday, March 26

Adam Blons

Psalm 35, John 9:1-17

The summer between seminary and the beginning of my ministry at FCCB I was a chaplain at Kapiolani Hospital in Hawaii. It was challenging to walk into patients' rooms daily, stepping into this still unfamiliar role of minister. Each patient I visited that summer helped me see myself more clearly as a chaplain and minister. But the most clarifying moment came from an encounter on a bus.

One Saturday I was returning from shopping when an agitated man got on the bus and sat down next to me. He was very upset, his eyes red with tears and his groans filling the bus. My first thought was that he must be whacked out on drugs and so I pulled myself inward just a bit. As his agony continued, a small voice in my conscience began saying, "What if he needs help?" Finally, I turned to him and said, "Excuse me, are you okay?" He shot me a glare I will never forget and said, "What would you do if you just found out you were HIV positive?"

The air escaped my lungs. When I took a breath again, the fear was gone and I was filled with compassion. But I didn't know what to say. He wasn't a patient in the hospital, and I wasn't a chaplain here. We were just two human beings caught in a moment of connection on a city bus. What could I do? After a long pause, I turned and said, "Where are you going now? Do you have someone you can talk to?" He turned and said, "I don't know where I will go, I feel like I just want to kill myself." His words hung heavy in the air and then, before I could respond, he stood up and got off at the next stop. I just sat there.

Psalm 121, John 9:18-41

I open my Bible to Psalm 121 and read these familiar words: "I lift my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." I am somewhat more accustomed to a different wording, "I lift mine eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my strength." The two different wordings suggest different spiritual states in which the Psalmist finds himself. In the first, he opens with a question. He asks, out of uncertainty, "Who will help me?"

Interestingly, his uncertainty doesn't seem to last very long. Indeed, his next words reveal the strength of his faith. He knows God will help him because God made heaven and earth. Perhaps the Psalmist's question is merely rhetorical. This is the impression left by re-reading the second translation – no questions asked there, rhetorical or otherwise. However, I find myself going back to the first translation because of its uncertainty.

Life, to state the obvious, is never certain. This stark fact has left me many times mired in fear. Will I be able to support myself into my old age? Will I suffer the premature loss of people I love? What will happen to me after I die? Not surprisingly, I have no concrete, unchanging answers to these questions. Instead, I repeat acts that comfort me. I go to church, I share meals with family and friends, I laugh with my husband. These rituals tether me to what doesn't change – the sanctuary of relationship.

While I don't pretend to know who or what "God" is, I do know what it means to honor a colleague by telling her she is loved (even when she thinks otherwise), by engaging with a difficult adversary in hopes that he will treat me with courtesy even when I know that, chances are, he won't. This is the source of my help. And I know, somehow, it is the same source the Psalmist encounters when he lifts his eyes to the hills.

Wednesday, March 28

Joanne Brown

Psalm 119:145-176, John 10:1-18

I've always loved the phrase "tender mercies" (Psalm 119: 156). It makes me think of gentleness, softness, a light touch. In the last several months I've been studying Tibetan Buddhist meditation practice and teachings. Compassion is at the heart of many of these. I am learning so much! One of the things that resonates is that everyone has a tender place or a "soft spot" – even the ones who seem hardhearted.

This morning – January 1 – as I drove to a friend's house for a New Year's Day breakfast, I was listening to a tape of a popular teacher, Pema Chodron, talking about compassion. Compassion is challenging, she says, because it involves the willingness to feel pain – our own, or others. Sometimes acknowledging our own pain is the hardest to do. Perhaps noticing, in an interchange with a friend or family member that we've been selfish or unkind, our tendency might be to feel shame, be angry with ourselves, and shut down.

But! If we give ourselves a moment to acknowledge the pain that our own shortcomings bring us – softly, with a light touch and not a sledgehammer! – we might transform the pain we feel into compassion. Instead of hardening and shutting down, we can soften. And at the moment we soften, we can realize that there are countless others, millions, everywhere in the world, who have the same shortcomings we have. We are linked to all of them.

In that moment of tenderness, of touching our soft spot, I think we become a Good Shepherd (John 10:1-18) to ourselves. We give ourselves room to grow, and with that spaciousness and tenderness, we become a good shepherd to all of our brothers and sisters – those we know and those we don't, as well.

## Psalm 131, John 10:19-42

Lent, for me, is always a time when I find myself reflecting on my own finitude. The ashes gently placed on my forehead on that Holy Wednesday remind me that one day I, too, will find rest in the earth. I sometimes get so consumed with my own life that it almost seems a mystery that this same earth turned for lifetimes before I came into being, and will turn for lifetimes more after I die. But I take great comfort in the reminder that each of our lives is only a moment in God's vast and mysterious Eternity. My theology doesn't rest on the idea that we will only experience peace and joy in a life after death; instead I believe that we live amidst the "already and the not-yet." God is, after all, already with us. It is our call to work for justice now, not later. But even this call doesn't require us to be something that we aren't. We are called only to be the imperfect, fleshy, striving, tired and joyful human beings that we are. We aren't called to be God. And thank goodness.

In their different ways, the author of Psalm 131 and John 10:19-42 are subtly reminding us of the very same thing: you are enough, just as you are. "I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me," writes the Psalmist. I don't believe that this means that we cannot strive for something greater in our lives. But I do believe that it is a call to take ourselves a little less seriously, to dance a bit more lightly upon the earth – to be imperfect. In John we are reminded of Jesus' struggles to identify himself as both God and human. But Jesus stood by what he said: "The Father and I are one." Rather than pointing out the difference between himself and us, I believe Jesus is reminding us that even God is human. Even God lives with ash and flesh. We are in good company, indeed. Amen.

Friday, March 30

Cynthia Whitehead

Psalm 141, John 11:1-27

I learned a new way to read the Bible this autumn. So I read Psalm 141 as I was taught. I took all my bibles and marked the text and read it. Night after day I recited it aloud, whispered it, read it silently, listening to the words. I read the text in all my bibles until the words seeped into my *nefesh*, my throat, the channel of my breath, my desire, my appetite, my passion.

After the sun had set and risen on the text, I began to hear the echoes of what was written before and after each phrase, and began to feel the layers of meaning in the different translations pressing against my mind. One afternoon I chose a word in the text and let it take me wandering. The next day I took a different word and followed its lead.

The text began to open itself to the ritual of attention. Paths spiraled out from my room in the Oakland hills into the deserts of Sinai, the lakes and hills of ancient Israel, the confidences and confusions of the writers and translators, and into the wilderness of my own experience. Questions confounded me. Answers began to sprout. Do I encounter the Bible? No. It encounters me, knocks me out of my niches. No lawyer, no student, no taxpayer, no churchgoer answers that knock.

When I follow the paths opened by the text I stumble into agony, betrayal, rage and revenge as easily as into calm, comfort and hope. It is all there. Day after night, I am increasing strange to myself.

O, no emotion, no striving is strange to God. Through these encounters I am enlarged. So, with the Psalmist I sing: "May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice."

(With thanks to PSR Prof. Andrea Bieler's course on Bibliodrama.)

Saturday, March 31

Brianna Grace Contaxis Tucker

Psalm 137:1-9, John 11:28-44

### COMPASSION

Compassion  
Feeling for someone else  
Helping them back on their feet  
Feeling pity for someone else  
And yet knowing what's right  
And doing the best thing possible

Thought to help someone else  
A wolf feeling pity for a rabbit  
A cat feeling pity for a mouse  
Feeling pain for them  
Seeing their perspective  
Feeling for someone else  
Compassion

Isaiah 50:4-9a, Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29, Philippians 2:5-11,  
Luke 19:28-40; 22:14-23:56

From Isaiah 50:  
The Lord God has given me  
the tongue of one who has been  
instructed  
to console the weary  
with a timely word;  
he made my hearing sharp every  
morning.  
that I might listen like one under  
instruction.  
The Lord God opened my ears  
and I did not disobey or turn back in  
defiance.

We've been given the ability to be filled with compassion, to hear God's loving, ever-generous instruction. In the sound of trees rustling in the wind, in the beautiful mellowing with age of friends and family, in the small voice that lets me know when I'm straying. They all seem to say the same thing: "This way, this way." May we on this day, and each day, dedicate ourselves to listening to God in all things.

Psalm 51:1-20, John 12:9-19

THE DISCIPLINE OF COMPASSION.

Every week the awareness of some new tragedy tugs at my heartstrings. The media reports a tsunami, a hurricane, an earthquake, a plague, a new wave of genocide, and I have an instant impulse to open my heart and my pocketbook. But all too soon I grow tired of the old stories about AIDs in Africa or ethnic cleansing in Darfur. Compassion fatigue sets in and I, conveniently, forget that a majority of citizens of this sad world live in a state of perpetual emergency, lacking food, medicine, decent government.

The great religious traditions have always recognized the difference between spontaneous acts of charity directed toward strangers and the discipline of compassion, and they encourage us to cultivate a steady intention to live with an awareness of the suffering of our neighbors.

What does it take to develop a compassionate heart? As I understand it, compassion is a process that goes beyond feeling.

Love necessarily begins with the quest for information, with curiosity and the collecting of facts. Who are my neighbors? My enemies? What is their history? Their religion? Their politics? If I don't know anything about them there is no way I can love them.

But facts alone are not enough. I need empathy. Like a novelist or a good therapist, I need to exercise my imagination to inhabit the world of the stranger to understand what makes him tick.

Compassion emerges when I move from understanding to feeling, from empathy to sympathy as I allow myself to feel what it is like to be a widow with children in a bombed out suburb of Iraq, or an "illegal alien." In compassion I take the suffering of the other into myself.

Action is born from the fullness of the feeling of compassion. When I identify with those who suffer, I am compelled to do something to alleviate their condition.

But what? The quantity of human suffering and need is overwhelming and my time, energy and money is painfully inadequate to the task. The only answer I have found to this "normal" tragic situation is to choose a cause, a people, a place and make the alleviation of some specific kind of suffering a part of my vocation.

In the end, compassion blossoms into gratitude because, as Saint Francis said, "It is in giving that we receive." When I practice compassion I find that my world is magically expanded. The stranger I invite into my consciousness and care increases the wealth of my experience.

The story is told that a stranger stopped the famous violinist Fritz Kreisler on the street and asked him "How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Supposedly, Kreisler replied "practice, practice, practice." The same could be said for how we learn to be compassionate.

Psalm 6, John 12:20-36

BEYOND WHAT SOME CALL DARKNESS,  
THE PERVASIVENESS OF WHO

We – in moments – wake up from fear, while inside  
the moving, stirring hours,  
when the hard-and-visible is all around and in us.

We – in moments –  
are awake to that dimension Who some  
call God, some experience  
as a Love that respects no boundaries,  
or Awe: a whole-body dilation.

There is the ideology inherent in human experience  
that's thick as atmosphere,  
measurable and everywhere and  
innocent as matter. It teaches:

Work within the limits: here are the parameters into  
which your love can move.  
Fit It into a human-made space.  
this computer's memory.  
this wallet.  
these blocks of time.  
(the fake anchors of our sanity), but What plays far  
beyond such parameters, like Bombadill, who tossed  
and played with Evil's Ring.

And what that What, that Who  
has done! and will keep on doing,  
spreading beyond, surpassing  
subverting – How?

To wake up during the day  
and find that the stones of our hearts – all along – were acorns.  
Where are our enemies, now?

Psalm 74, John 12:27-36

Psalm 74 is a heart wrenching plea to God for salvation in the face of foes who are destroying all the sacred meeting places. When will you remember your covenant with Israel? God must be angry. Why do you not act, God, when surely you have the power... "You divided the sea by your might...you made summer and winter." God stop this suffering. Let the poor and downtrodden praise your name.

In John chapter 12, verses 27-36, Jesus is also troubled about his forthcoming death, but he turns his plea around. "And what should I say – 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Even his followers ask Jesus, why if you are the Messiah, why won't God let you live forever by saving you from dying?

Jesus replies to this pointed question as he refers to himself as the light, "Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light." For Jesus, it seems God's power is not about rewarding our faith with the removal of death, pain, and suffering and then our praising God. Jesus *asks us to walk* in the light of God's loving and compassionate presence *in all* we think, speak, feel, do and experience – including loss, anger, fear, despair, confusion, and uncertainty, knowing we are *held in the midst in God's grace*.

This is power. It's focusing away from rules, appearances, and known outcomes toward our being in conscious contact with God and giving attention. I feel Jesus' incredible energy in accepting and trusting God in what is to come. May we speak and act in the light of creative compassion, surrender to God and ask for clarity through open and honest questions of whomever or whatever we meet (especially ourselves) – not for purposes of judging or control, but rather an internal shift toward living in wholeness.

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19, John 13:1-17, 31b-35

When I was 8 years old, my father threatened me and my brother with a butcher knife and beat us for fighting. This was nothing unusual, for it happened many times before. This time, however, was different. Seized by anger, my father dragged us into our bathroom and locked us inside. "I'll turn on the gas heater and kill you. I'll burn the place down," he yelled. In the dark, I smelled the steady stream of carbon monoxide, hissing the kiss of death as it filled the tiny room. My brother and I banged on the door; we begged for mercy, our voices hoarse from screaming. Every cry took us a step closer to death.

I prayed to God to give me strength; I didn't want to die in fear and horror. Then a moment of clarity: "Open the window!" I told my brother. He was sobbing too hard to hear me. My hands groped for the window frame and yanked it open. With that breath of air, I was given a second life.

Later that year I left my father to live with my grandparents. The first day at my new home, I lay down on my bed and, for the first time, stretched out my legs until they were perfectly straight. I didn't have to curl up anymore in my sleep for fear that my father would chop off my legs in the middle of the night. I'd never felt so free to live life fully.

I didn't forgive my father for his trespasses; I even swore not to attend his funeral when he dies. Surely my brother felt the same way since he took the heaviest blows as the older son. I was wrong. A few years ago my father fell ill. To my surprise, my brother took him in and cared for him. When asked why, my brother simply answered, "He's an old man."

Being compassionate is easy when it involves a cute puppy or an innocent child. Having compassion for someone who's hurt you requires forgiveness. When my brother heard a cry for mercy from my father, he answered it. In witnessing that act of compassion, I realized that my freedom was illusionary. How could I be free to grow spiritually when I deny my father the very humanity that he had denied me? How could I be free to love when I am unable to forgive?

Psalm 22, John 18:1–19:42

What am I, a progressive Christian, doing here at the foot of the Cross? I would much rather be with Jesus as he feeds a huge crowd, or engages the Pharisees in a contest of wits, or heals a blind man. The Cross can be a singularly awkward and uncomfortable image for progressive Christians.

Yet the crucifixion is the crux of the difference between progressives and fundamentalists. For the latter, the Cross symbolizes the ultimate, total payment for personal sin, and only by believing in this definitive reparation can one be welcomed into heaven. For progressives, though, Jesus' death was, at its most basic, a political event in which Jesus was horribly punished for preaching a radical gospel that challenged the authorities of that (and this) era. In addition, Jesus' death, in Marcus Borg's post-Easter interpretation, is "a proclamation of radical grace." If Jesus' death was the final sacrifice for all sin, "it means that God accepts us just as we are, and that the Christian life is not about getting right with God." Instead, our daily lives are to be devoted to promoting, courageously, God's will in our world. We are called to live as Jesus did, declaring and living God's love for all beings. Jesus' sacrifice emboldens us to live in "radical trust in God and relationship to God that makes possible our transformation and, ideally and ultimately, the transformation of the world."

The poor will eat and be satisfied;  
They who seek the Lord will praise him –  
May your hearts live forever!

- Psalm 22:26

Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16, John 19:38-42

Psalm 31 is a prayer for help. The writer is turning to God for help, begging to be rescued from his enemies.

Who among us has not prayed, "God help me!" Can God really help me? Can God really guide me? For me the answer is yes, but not in the "magic wand" way I imagined as a child, but rather by giving me a way to reflect on what is right and honest. I believe that if I pray with an open heart, clarity and answers will come. If I truly need help, prayer will help me find the help, either from within or by seeking help from the right person. When I am able to pray, usually I am ready to take action. Prayer helps me find the right action, for the right reasons. This, for me, is God's love.

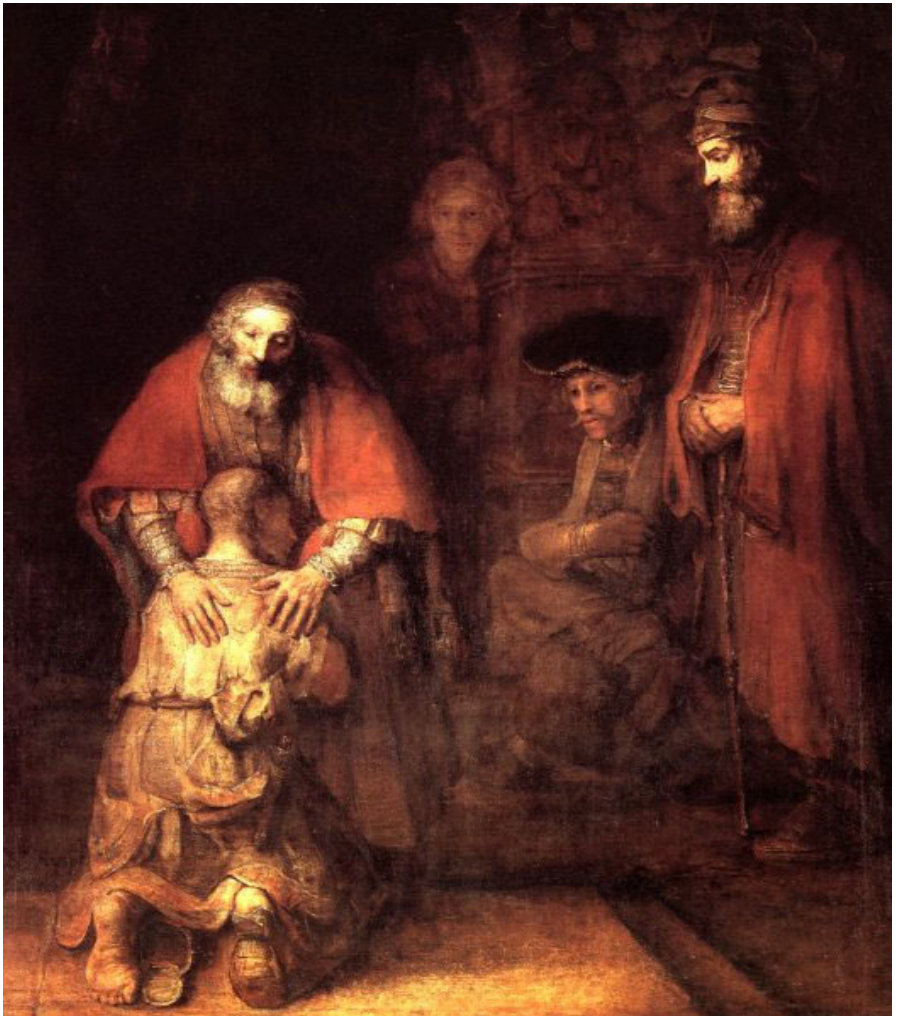
In John 19:38-42, Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple of Jesus, prepares Jesus' body for burial. This is an act of bravery because he is afraid to be identified as a disciple. Despite this fear, he lovingly tends to Jesus' body.

This psalm and verse are different sides of the same coin. First God helps someone and then Jesus is cared for and honored. It makes me ask myself, "How do I care for God?" I think the answer lies in gratitude. I need to recognize God's love and guidance. I need to see God's hand in my life, in my blessings and in my struggles. I simply need to see God in my life, and to be grateful for it!

Isaiah 65:17-25, Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24, Acts 10:34-43, John 20:1-18

While it was still dark, Mary came to the tomb to care for the body of Jesus. She was, instead, confronted with the totally unexpected. An empty grave! Grief stricken, she asked the gardener, "Where have you taken him?" and then, looking up, realized that the man she thought was the gardener was Jesus himself.

Good Friday starts with loss and disillusion. All that this amazing man exemplified had died with him. Easter is a total turnaround. The fact that the essence of this man outlived his body is the hope of the world. He exemplified love and empowers each one of us to carry on his work by loving, really loving, one another.



Rembrandt, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*