

“Inconvenient Compassion”  
July 19, 2009

Ephesians 2:11-22  
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

I had a friend and co-worker in my early years of practicing law who developed what seemed to be a surefire stress test. Because the law firm where we worked wasn't the most supportive of environments and the work itself tended to be high pressure, Deborah had found that being attentive to her own level of tension was an absolute necessity. As I was learning the ropes at that law firm, she shared her stress test with me and recommended that I join her in realizing that if I started to flunk the test regularly, it was time either to get out of town or to find another job.

This is how Deborah described her stress test. “Next time you go to the grocery store at the end of a work day and you're standing in line, waiting to check out, notice how you feel about how long you're having to wait. If you're just feeling impatient, you're probably not too stressed out. But if your impatience keeps growing and growing and you start fantasizing about taking your grocery cart and knocking over other shoppers so you can get out of there faster, maybe it's time to start planning your next vacation ... or your next job search.”

It was good advice. I've kept it in mind over the last 20 years, adapting as necessary, and now it includes things like my reactions to drivers who don't use their turn signals and to people who don't say anything – not even an “unh” – when I say good morning to them on my morning walk with our dog Peetah. Those mornings when I start wanting to run after someone and shout, “I said, ‘Good morning!!’” it's a sure sign that I need to make some adjustments in my daily life, a sure sign that I need to do some serious stress reduction and to find a way to take myself a whole lot less seriously.

After reading last week about immigration opponents who want to find a way to prevent children born in the States from being U.S. citizens if their parents are undocumented immigrants, I started thinking that it might be a good idea to develop a *compassion* test and, as Deborah urged with her stress test, to realize we're in trouble if we repeatedly flunk the compassion test.

Perhaps the compassion test could be something like this: When we encounter someone or a story about someone trying to make it in the world, people trying to build a decent life for themselves or for their children, do we react to them as brothers and sisters, as part of the sacred web of life, or do we react to them as threats, threats to our sense of entitlement, threats to our illusion of security? Do we see other people as they truly are, blessed creations of a God of abundant love, and open our lives to their presence, or do we see other people through a distorting lens of fear and then circle the wagons so we can keep them at a distance and keep demonizing them? In short, do we encounter others, see their needs, and then offer compassion only when it's convenient?

Some folks might argue that embracing any kind of compassion test would simply be a knee-jerk, bleeding-heart liberal sort of thing. Maybe it would; maybe it wouldn't. Whether or not it's knee-jerk or bleeding-heart, what it might be is a recognition that all

of us on this planet truly are in this together and that it's actually in our self-interest to look out for one another.

But whatever the *politics*, partisan or otherwise, of a call to compassion for "the other," whoever that might be at any given time, it's firmly rooted in the ministry of Jesus and in a Christian understanding of what God was and is seeking to do through Jesus. This morning's readings go to some lengths to make that clear.

In the passage from Ephesians that Dick read to us, Paul (or someone writing in his name) is reminding the church in Ephesus, a bustling city in the Roman Empire, that what God did and continues to do through Jesus is to break down walls, to end hostility and suspicion, and to create connection where there has been division. With many words and many metaphors, Paul is telling the Ephesians and anyone else who will listen that in and through Jesus, God seeks, not only to bring us all into closer union with Godself, but also to bring us all into closer union with one another. Paul urges us to realize that we are all meant to be members of the household of God, equally in need of blessing, equally in need of compassion, equally called to *be* compassionate.

And just in case the Ephesians passage hasn't made the call to connection and compassion clear enough, along comes a story from the Gospel of Mark to reinforce it. It's a story that calls us to compassion, a story that calls us to compassion even if, *especially* if, it's an inconvenient time or place or occasion.

In Mark's typical brevity, we learn that Jesus and the disciples have been busy. They're tired; they're hungry. They need to rest, to eat, to *pray*. Knowing that the disciples are more than a little frayed, knowing that they are spent from the hard work of being disciples, and knowing from his own experience what it's like to be tired, hungry, and in need of peace and prayer, Jesus gathers them up and tells them to come away to a deserted place for rest and restoration.

But Jesus and the disciples are not alone. Other people who have seen or heard that God's healing, loving presence is tangibly, visibly present in Jesus of Nazareth recognize Jesus and the disciples as they board to boat to seek a place of rest. Knowing that they need what God is offering through Jesus, the crowds hurry around the water and actually reach the other side before Jesus and the disciples do. And then Mark gives us these words: "As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion on them."

Despite all the reasons Jesus has to tell the crowds, "Sorry, this is a bad time. Sorry, giving you what you need will mean I and my disciples get less of what we need. Sorry, it would be really inconvenient to change my plans, my journey, my *life* to give you anything right now. Sorry, you're just not important enough to make a claim on my life and ministry" ... despite all the reasons he has to say those things and push the crowds away so he and his disciples can get to a deserted place, rest, and eat, Jesus stops, has compassion for them, and begins to teach.

"As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them ... and he began to teach them many things." He treated no one as alien or stranger or undeserving of compassion. No matter how inconvenient the time, the place, or the need, Jesus treated no one as undeserving of compassion. And he said to his disciples and to anyone who would listen, "Follow me." In and through scripture, in and through the presence of the Living Christ within us and around us, Jesus still says to his disciples and

to anyone who will listen, “Follow me. Lose your life, so you may gain it. Pick up your cross. And follow me.”

With such a demanding message, it’s a true miracle that anyone has ever been willing to try to follow Jesus. Yes, his message and ministry also included blessing, forgiveness, grace, healing, and love, but those things don’t erase his teachings and ministry about costly discipleship, losing our lives, loving our enemies, blessing those who would curse us, even kill us, and having compassion for those whose needs might seem to be in competition with our own.

It’s a daunting Gospel that’s been handed down through the generations, and yet, despite its age and despite its inconvenient demands, it still has the power to draw people into discipleship; it still has the power to draw people into a willingness to try to follow Jesus. And despite the long record of the Christian church’s abuses and mistakes, the long record of individual Christians’ brokenness and hypocrisy, Christianity’s central claim, that we can see the very nature of God in and through Jesus, can still intrigue and enlighten, transfix and transform.

And what we can see in this morning’s readings is that the very nature of God is reconciling, self-giving compassion, seeking to find expression in our lives. We’re invited to realize that just as God was fully, tangibly, visibly present in Jesus, God seeks to be fully, tangibly, visibly present in us, to make peace, to feed the hungry, to liberate the oppressed, to love the seemingly unlovable, and to have compassion even when it will cost us something to do so.

The Christian story offers us a vision of God at work in Jesus, in the world, and in us, a vision of a God who seeks to bring us into union with one another and with all of creation. The Christian story offers us a vision of a God who calls us to apply a kind of compassion test, a test that asks, “Is what we do, how we spend our time and money, and how we treat one another rooted in compassion and a longing for that union with God and with our neighbors? *Or* is what we do, how we spend our time and money, and how we treat one another rooted in compassion only when it’s convenient, only when it’s easy, only when it doesn’t threaten our assumptions or our lifestyle?”

Through generations, Christians have told the stories of Jesus saying to those who would be his disciples that his yoke is easy and his burden is light, while also saying that we must take up our own crosses and be willing to lose our lives in order to gain them. How can both be true? How is it possible to have compassion, to incarnate compassion, to live compassion when we are tired, weary, worried about ourselves and our families? What do we do when it’s not simply inconvenient to offer care and compassion, but seemingly impossible, because we think we have nothing left to give? Those are the moments when we can choose to remember that the source of compassion is a God whose blessing is extravagant and whose love can make the impossible possible. When we find ourselves unable to offer compassion because we can’t find anything left within us, we can remember that the compassion, the blessing, and the love God offers the world is endless, we can be willing to drink them all in, and then we can find that we, in turn, have compassion to offer, even when we thought it was too inconvenient to offer it.

And maybe tomorrow morning or the next day or the next day, when someone’s silent response to my hearty “Good morning” starts to annoy me beyond all proportion, I can pause, I can ask for God’s guidance and blessing, and I can then be able to wish that person health and healing and a good day. And maybe tomorrow or the next day or the

next, when you start to feel annoyed or threatened or impatient beyond all proportion, you, too, can pause, ask for guidance and blessing, and find yourself able to offer compassion, even when it seems inconvenient.

Amen.

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