

Lent 2014

Meditations



*"I will cover you with My feathers,
And under My wings you shall take refuge."*

Psalm 91:4

Artwork:
“Under God’s Wing”
by Katherine Doerge
www.myheartleaps.com

Compassion

It is symptomatic of our human nature, in general, and our American culture, in particular, that we seek to surround ourselves with a superabundance of material comforts. I need hardly bother to make this point heard above the deafening roar of Madison Avenue which shouts it every day. There are creams (and surgery) that make us look younger and cars that make us look wealthier. There are houses that make us feel powerful and technology that makes us feel smarter. There are trifles and curios without number to clutter our cabinets and speak well of our good taste, and there are shopping malls and mail order houses without end to store and sell them. There are clubs and societies and schools and churches that make us feel well-connected and well-bred. When we set our hearts and trust in these places the Bible states that we're well on our way to enslavement. It's not so much a struggle against want (like Scarlet O'Hara screaming out, "As God as my witness, I'll never be hungry again.") but a pledge of fealty to the things of this world.

It's during the season of Lent that we are well-reminded of real purpose in life and that following Christ is much better than chasing after self-absorption. It is during Lent that we are reminded of God's self-offering love, that it's better to give than to receive. We are brought to mind of our finite nature, and that each of us has a whole set of foibles, sins and mistakes for which we can seek pardon and restoration. And we are reminded that a growing number of people in this country have simple homes (or none at all) not palaces, sparse supper tables not banquet dining tables, furnishings that come from second-hand stores rather than from dowries. If we can hear this Lent the voice of Mr. Lincoln's "better angels," we can step away from the clutter of our own hearts and the stuff around us and take a journey of introspection, rediscovery, renewal and resolve.

The theme for this season at Saint Michael and All Angels is "compassion" -- to have "passionate mercy for and with others." If we truly take on a newfound level of compassion for the people for whom Christ died, then our sackcloth and ashes of the season can issue forth in breaking out the best wine and shouting "alleluia" come Easter. If this journey is to have sticking power, it won't be a temporary journey for forty days, but will become a life-pattern, a life-long spiritual discipline of offering Christ's compassion each and every day.

I invite you to take some time each day to read and savor the writings in this Lenten daily devotional series. And I offer my gratitude to those who lovingly penned them.

Have a holy and compassionate Lent, my friends.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bob Daniels". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and personal.

March 5 Ash Wednesday

Bob Dannals

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 Psalm 103 II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

In the biblical days, people grieved publicly. In the text from Joel appointed for Ash Wednesday, we hear of people rending a garment in grief. The grieving ripped the front of their tunic, and for a time, wore the torn tunic so that others would know of their loss, grief, set-back. After a few weeks the tunic would be coarsely mended, its tear still obvious, and others would know that the person wearing the tunic had experienced a loss recently. Later the tear would be mended properly, and a neatly sewn tear would let others know some time had passed since the loss. This grieving system was employed so that, in lieu of obituaries, e-mails, texts, and twitters, friends and strangers would know to reach out to the bereaved, to show concern and compassion.

Lent offers us a season for engaging human frailties, sin and loss. It is a time for us to open our lives to honest appraisal, revealing pain, expressing loss, dealing with set-back. It is a time to explore new spiritual frontiers and disciplines. It is a time to experience again the mercy, forgiveness, love and compassion of Christ and his journey to the cross. It is a time to make new commitments to live our faith closer to the human conditions in front of us, including reaching out to those who are hurting in our midst.

So, today begins with ashes. A solemn remembrance that we were made from dust and to dust we will return. A sign that we join the rest of humanity in humble realization that we live in a world of life and death, gain and loss, health and illness. In the ancient religious liturgy, a burning fire symbolized a purging away of sin, remorse and grief, so that new life could begin. Fields were burned so that new crops would yield a bumper harvest. Keepers of the Jewish flame were reminded in the ash and bowl of tears of the hardship and death the people of Israel endured.

Today, we too gather as a community around bowls of ashes. We pray that the ash crosses smudged on our foreheads will enable us to see that life which has been cast down is being raised up and hearts that have been rended are now being mended.

March 6, Thursday After Ash Wednesday

Tom Rhodus

Hab. 3:1-10, 16-18 Psalm 37:1-18 Philippians 3:12-21 [John 17:1-8](#)

You all know how the story goes: The people ask Jesus, "What is the greatest commandment?" He gives a dual response: "First, love God. Second, love your neighbor as yourself."

In John's telling of the Last Supper, Jesus adds a third commandment. He says: "I am giving you a new commandment, *that you love one another as I have loved you.*"

So, how does Jesus love us? In what way are we supposed to love each other? The best description lies in the word "compassion". Throughout the Old Testament, God is described as having compassion. Likewise in the Gospels, it is said time and again that Jesus had compassion.

Marcus Borg, the contemporary theologian, makes an interesting observation about compassion. In Hebrew, the word for "compassion" comes from the same word that means "womb". Can you imagine a more intense love than the love that a mother has for her unborn child? That describes the feeling that God has for you and for me. It is also what is required of us if we hope to follow the commandment to love one another *as God loves us*.

What does this mean for us in practical terms? We are merely human, not divine. We do not have an infinite amount of time and energy to spend on other people, even if they are "our neighbors". Frequently we are advised to make sure that other people "respect our boundaries". As the poet Robert Frost observed, "Good fences make good neighbors". *How can we ever measure up to our Lord's commands?*

It is important that Jesus' summary of the law says that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, not instead of ourselves. This means that God expects us to be compassionate and caring towards ourselves in the same way that God is caring toward us. If we have no compassion for ourselves, it will not be possible to love our neighbors "as we love ourselves".

Being compassionate means being honest with other people and also with ourselves. Be compassionate to your neighbors – yes, indeed, love others extravagantly!-- but also take time to love yourself. For unless you love yourself as compassionately as God expects you to love your neighbors, then you are falling short of the Commandments.

The source and inspiration for our compassion is God's love for us. If we are indeed as precious to God as a mother's unborn child, who could fail to love us?

Father, help us so to experience your love and compassion so that we may confidently extend and reflect the same love and compassion to our neighbors, who are all travelling on this earthly journey with us. Amen.

March 7 Friday After Ash Wednesday

Mary Kardell

Ezek. 18:1-4,25-32 Psalm 95 or 31 Philippians 4:1-9 [John 17:9-19](#)

What I find most startling about the story of the Good Samaritan is that he stops his journey, on a long, dangerous road, for the sake of his neighbor. He doesn't consider the time, his destination or his to-do list. Instead, he comes near the beaten and robbed man, sees him and is moved with compassion. This compassion alters the course of his entire day. He gives away his day to a stranger in need of love and compassion.

Joy is hidden in compassion. The word *compassion* means "to suffer with."

It seems unlikely that suffering with another person would bring joy. But being with a person in pain, offering simple presence to someone in despair, sharing in times of confusion and uncertainty can bring us joy. Not happiness, not excitement, not great satisfaction, but the quiet joy of being there for someone else and living in solidarity with our brothers and sisters suffering with heavy hearts. Sharing our humanity with others, being available to our neighbors even when it isn't convenient, is what we are called to do.

I have experienced joy with compassion. Walking beside fellow parishioners in some of the most challenging times of their lives, listening and supporting them serving as a Stephen Minister.

I resolve this Lenten Season to listen closely to the ways that God is teaching me how to be a better steward of all of my time. Help me to live into my Christian calling at all hours of the week, not just Sundays.

What is compassion? Is “compassion,” the same as “mercy”? Pity? Sympathy? Empathy? At least one dictionary defines compassion as, “sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others.” But true compassion, to me, is a feeling of concern and a connection **that leads to action**. Compassion is something that is (or should be) acted upon; not simply felt.

And yet, when contemplating what to write for this Lenten mediation, I struggled to find an example of when I had actually shown compassion – true compassion – in response someone else’s misfortune. In my memory, I stumbled upon minor acts of kindness or simple courtesies that I had extended to someone, but could find no knock-your-socks-off display of compassion worthy of public discussion. Yes, I’ve cared for an ill parent and my ill children and sure, I’ve rescued a stray animal now and again.

But through this exercise, I came to the unhappy realization that although I very often **feel** sadness, sympathy or concern for others who are suffering, far too often I fall short of showing compassion through my action. Rather, too often, I do nothing to show the compassion I feel. Too often I do nothing to help. Too often, I do nothing to emulate Jesus. I do nothing to share His love, His mercy, His compassion.

In Ezek. 39:21-29, God shows compassion to the Israelites despite the fact that they were unfaithful to him. Yet when I feel betrayed, my instinct is to punish or to seek retribution against those who have wronged me. Likewise, in the reading from Philippians 4:10-20, I am reminded that Jesus is, “the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want,” and yet, when I am “in want,” I am more likely to despair than to find contentment. And though the Psalms remind me that I am forgiven, I have trouble forgiving others.

I profess to be a Christian. I am active in the church. I try to be a decent human being. Yet, I fall woefully short of Jesus’ example in acting on my faith. I get trapped by fear or laziness or I get sidetracked on the daily matters of my busy little life. I am selfish. So what am I to do? The answer is simple. I must act on the compassion I feel. I must behave in a way that is consistent with my faith in Jesus. It is not enough for me to profess to be a Christian. It is not enough for me to simply “feel compassion” for those who are in need.

Lent is the perfect time to take action. So, rather than giving up chocolate or some other minor vice, during this Lenten season I am giving up the fear of action and replacing it with action - one compassionate gesture each day. These acts may be small (a helping hand to my fallen child, a kind word to a friend who had a hard day), but they are acts -- acts of compassion that are deliberate, that are kind and that reveal Christ’s love through me. And my first act of compassion is to forgive myself.

Please consider joining me in an act of compassion each day during Lent.

Today we read about humanity's fall from grace and our expulsion from the Garden of Eden for disobedience. Before this time, we knew no suffering, no hardship and had no wants that went unfulfilled. Very truly, we lived in paradise. But what kind of paradise was it? Were we spoiled children? When everything is available at all times, we can fall into the trap of complacency and begin to take things for granted, even to feel entitled.

We need struggle. Sometimes people appear to create problems for themselves, perhaps just to have something to struggle against. These issues are no less real – hardship is part of the human condition and overcoming it shapes us. Certainly an all-knowing God knew this and knew for us to grow we had to struggle. I cannot believe God was surprised when we ate of the fruit.

I have often wondered why God sent Jesus. Lately, I think it was because we had overcomplicated the message God had for us. Jesus came and demonstrated love, compassion and patience with us during his lifetime. Through knowing Jesus, we come to some understanding of the pure love, compassion, and patience God has for us, and we have a real example rather than an abstract idea – by living with us, he showed us how to live.

Compassion can be described as suffering what someone else suffers with them. Walking with them. It is the ultimate form of empathy to suffer with someone, and true empathy is born from love for the other person. Jesus shared life with us and chose death for us out of this love.

“By one man's obedience, the many will be made righteous.”

In seeing Jesus, one without sin, agree to sacrifice himself for our sins, to suffer not only with us, but also for us, we get some idea what compassion God has for us, and we witness Jesus' ultimate obedience. Righteousness is defined as being in a right relationship with God, and while it can be easy to forget, obeying God's commandments helps keep us in this right relationship.

We are still in the Garden of Eden when we choose to be, through our actions, in a right relationship with God – modeled for us by his son Jesus, through his compassion for us.

And it may be that from time to time when we are expelled from the garden we should take it as an opportunity to learn to be more compassionate.

Webster's defines *compassion* as the sympathetic consciousness of another's distress together with a desire to alleviate it. Compassion is discussed in the Bible over and over again... at least 75 times. Many times in the Gospels, we see Jesus display compassion to the sick, the afflicted, and the helpless. In our readings for today, Psalm 41 contains David's prayer to the Lord for compassion as he faces serious illness. Compassion, we are told, is important for us to receive from God...and important for us to give to others.

I recently witnessed God's compassion, and the compassion of others, when my beloved grandmother died at age 97. Until the last two weeks of her life, she was completely independent and mentally sharp as a tack. She lived alone, still drove herself with a valid driver's license, paid all of her bills, and stayed attuned to current events... from the record of any member of Congress to the stats of most major league pitchers. In a word, she was remarkable.

Last November, she developed an infection that worsened dramatically very quickly. She was adamant that she would not go to the hospital, and she confessed that she was "tired". When it became apparent that the medication for her infection was no longer working, and when she was starting to have pain, it became clear that "tired" meant really tired...or, as we could almost hear her say, "I've had enough." We called Hospice.

For us, Hospice represented an answer to my grandmother's distress. In reality, Hospice was compassion. During one of the Hospice nurse's visits, I witnessed her gentle compassion first hand as she lovingly cared for my grandmother. Her name was Pam, and she exemplified compassion in everything she did. Like us, she had the desire to alleviate my grandmother's distress. But Pam had more... a warm touch, a confident assurance, a comforting word, a knowing smile (and yes, good medications!)... all things that my grandmother needed in the final days of her well-lived life. Gran had come into this world as a Child of God, and she exited this world in the same way, as a Child of God, in peace, not pain, thanks in large measure to the compassion of others, like Pam.

During this Season of Lent, as we remember from dust we came and to dust we shall return, let us also be reminded of God's compassion for us not only at the beginning and the end of our lives, but throughout our time on earth to the end of our own lives. Let us be reminded that we have the opportunity every day to extend God's compassion to others. And then let us actually be compassionate...like Nurse Pam, like Jesus, like God calls us to be.

Compassion—the person I think who embodies this characteristic the most is our precious friend Jean Baty who is now in her heavenly home with Our Lord.

Jean was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis at age 29 and lived nearly forty years with this dreadful disease. Yet, few really knew this because her desire was to look outward, sharing concerns for others and not focusing on herself. She was an acolyte serving at God's altar; for many years she served as head of the Needy Family Fund (now the Good Samaritan Fund); she was always on the Women of the Church Gifts Committee because she was so aware of the many needs that were out there; she knew all the people *by name* on her FOUR Meals on Wheels routes; she was a greeter at the Woman's Exchange and always brought such happiness to those who entered; for many years she and 2 friends served special lunches monthly and quarterly to the SMAA staff to celebrate their birthdays; when her eyesight failed due to some medication, she found a phone with large numbers and called parishioners who had just come home from the hospital to see what needs they had and to tell them that SMAA was there for them; and, when our church launched Jubilee, Jean was on the front line to work, take food, volunteer and be a constant cheerleader.

Jean lived a life of compassion towards others—she sent cards for funny reasons, for sad ones, for birthdays, for congratulations and for just thinking of you. At Jean's memorial service, Bill Power said, "She had a finely tuned ear for the cries of the helpless, a keen awareness of the unloved and the unlovable. She welcomed the stranger and greeted one and all with that marvelous smile. Her life illustrated what she believed."

Jean chose joy. As Henri Nouwen said, "Joy is what makes life worth living. We can choose joy. One may choose to trust that what happened, painful as it may be, holds a promise." Jean lived by Jesus' directive to go out into the world and serve others. She was truly a servant leader. And I know, the minute she got to heaven, God said, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Jean lived by the promise and shared her love (and hysterical jokes) with all she touched. She was the embodiment of compassion and I learned so much from her.

Dear Lord, May we look outward and with compassion to all we meet. Amen

P.S. My precious Mother would have been 96 today. She taught me compassion in so many ways and I'd just like to say, Happy Birthday, Granny Fluff! (She had really naturally curly hair!)

“A leper came to Him begging Him, and kneeling he said to Him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Moved by pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.” -- Mark 1: 40-42

I struggled with our theme of compassion in these Lenten Meditations. I searched out definitions – “sharing a burden” or “sympathetic pity.” There are certainly numerous occasions that I have reacted with compassion in my life – to my wife, my children and to friends and strangers in need. When we give a homeless person the money they request, we are motivated by compassion in our heart, not the logic of our minds.

But as I thought of when I had received compassion in my life, I began to struggle. It’s not that I haven’t had people be compassionate with me. The list is long: my wife, parents, teachers, friends, coaches and strangers. Frankly, though, I really didn’t want to receive it, didn’t want to admit I needed it.

All of my life, I have been trained and I have prepared myself to be independent and successful. This goal meant that I wanted to be in control. I strived for a better future for myself and my family which was based on hard work, achievement and self-reliance. And so, when I hit a rough spot, I think I felt others’ compassion as pity more than a sharing of my burden, a reminder of my failure rather than an offer of support.

And as I wrestled with these thoughts, I realized that when people had shown me compassion over the years, I was probably more than a little ungrateful.

In the passage from the Gospel of Mark above, the leper faithfully asks Jesus to choose to make him clean, and Jesus responds, moved by pity (compassion), “I do choose. Be made clean!” Jesus has chosen us to be made clean and to be loved. His grace is an act of compassion that we should receive gratefully.

Gracious God, We thank you for your compassion and grace and for choosing us by sending your Son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins. Help us to cede control in our lives, co-operate with your will and gratefully receive your compassion from the saints you send to us in this world. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

In the Gospel reading for today, we read the story of Jesus healing the paralytic. This story has been significant in my faith formation as it was always a good story to reenact on youth retreats. There are a number of people who can play a role, and whoever gets to play the paralytic gets to be overly dramatic in the end! But as I think more and more about this passage, I realize that as a preacher I would most likely focus on the healing and forgiveness aspects of this story and not the compassion that is so present in the four friends that carried the paralytic.

Sometimes I think we forget about the people who get us to places of healing and wholeness in our lives. Those people who carried us spiritually, physically, and emotionally are often overshadowed when we are so consumed by the end result. Don't get me wrong, we know how important their presence has been, but the acts of compassion that play out are sometimes so quiet, so unnoticeable, that we just move about our life like it has always been this way.

When I was in middle school, my older brother Brian was diagnosed with a brain tumor, a craniopharyngioma. We knew something wasn't right when he had headaches that lasted days and a gallon of milk would disappear in the middle of the night because of excessive thirst. When we received the diagnosis, everything went spinning. Having only my mom to take care of us was challenging. She needed to be with Brian, but Steven and I also needed her. It was here that we were all being carried by the people that loved us.

During the surgery, the recovery, and weeks of radiation treatments, my family was more physically separated than it had ever been in my little life, but never once did I ever feel that I wasn't cared for or loved. The people of our church rallied around us and picked us up from school, fed us dinner, tucked us in at night, drove us to radiation treatments and doctor's offices, and never let us know that what was going on was anything different than what was happening in their own families.

The compassion that was shown to me and my family all those many years ago made an indelible mark on me. We were carried by so many people during that time and we were brought to a place of healing and wholeness. I would bet that most of those folks don't remember what they did on a day to day basis for us, but I do. I can still remember the smell of people's houses and sipping iced tea at their kitchen tables. You see, compassion is more than just the act itself, but is really how you change someone's life because of the act.

The paralytic's life was changed because his friends went to extreme measures to get him in the presence of Jesus. May we be able to act with such bold and determined compassion when it is our time to be a friend and carry someone when they are in need.

March 14 Lent I - Friday

Genesis 40:1-23 Psalm 95 or 40 or 54 I Cor. 3:16-23 Mark 2:13-22

From PRAYERS FOR THE DOMESTIC CHURCH by Edward Hays

Lord God, You who know the secrets of our hearts,
Come now and fill me with the spirit of sincerity
As I pledge myself to You and to the coming of Your kingdom.

Lord, I desire to serve You with all my heart, with all my soul and with all my strength.
I surrender myself to Your holy plan for me as I seek to be perfect as You are perfect.
May I strive for excellence in all the work of my hands.
May I strive to live within the spirit of holy poverty, living a simple way of life.
May my greatest possession be Your love and the love of those around me.
I strive for excellence in loving, asking that my love be always chaste and whole.
May I strive to be obedient and open to the mystery of Your voice within me,
Willing to embrace whatever You may ask of me.

Lord and Friend, I rededicate myself to a life of prayer and worship of You.
May a song of praise be the constant melody of my heart.
I re-commit myself to serve the needs of those around me
And the needs of all the world.
May I find my salvation *here*
At this time and in this place where I now live.
May my union with those who share my commitment
Be a source of confirmation and inspiration to me.

Lord, I marvel that You, in Your divine wisdom,
Have chosen me to be an instrument of Your creative salvation.
May all the work of my hands,
Even my failing and stumbling,
Be leaven to make that much desired Kingdom a reality.
Bless me now with Your abounding love
As I promise to be Your friend, servant and holy minister.
May I ever live out this commitment in Your name: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen

She came into the room in her scrubs and kissed him on the forehead. While gently rubbing the same spot with her thumb she turned from his hospital bed and lovingly talked to his wife who was grieving the imminent death of her husband. This oncology nurse had come to the ICU to say goodbye to a man she had nursed on and off for three years.

He did pass away shortly after she left. His widow composed herself and left to meet the hospital chaplain. Passing by the elevator doors, one opened, and into the grieving widow's arms came another of her husband's long-time nurses – his favorite one, actually - dressed in street clothes.

Asked why she was at the hospital, the nurse said she hadn't really known until that very moment. Her husband and children were waiting for her in the car in the parking lot floors below. The family was driving back into town from a long vacation and something told her she was needed at the hospital. She followed the "something" and found herself there, at that point in time, stepping off the elevator to comfort my mother.

It was certainly something to watch unfold.

While my siblings and I had visited over time and were there at the last day, it was these two nurses who had really been "there" all along for our two parents. The four of them shared many victories and defeats that my siblings and I can only wonder about. During those last years, my sisters, brothers and I had been busy living our lives far from that oncology floor. During those last years, these nurses were living their daily lives intimately intertwined with those of our parents.

When my mother occasionally talks about those dark days, now fifteen years later, her face always softens when mentioning the compassion of the nurses. Always there for her, always kind.

My religion is kindness. – the Dalai Lama

***My soul came to me pure
drawn from the reservoir of the Holy.***

All the time it remains within me,

***I am thankful for its thirst
for compassion and justice.***

Let my eyes behold the beauty of all creatures;

let my hands know the privilege of righteous deeds. – Shabbat Prayer: My Soul

Yesterday a terrible storm blanketed Atlanta. Black ice made the roads impassable. People were stranded in cars and buses overnight in freezing temperatures. In that sprawling Southern city, the world came to a grinding halt. Misery and despair were everywhere.

The story was front page above-the-fold stuff. The roads, the weather, the politicians apologizing. It was a gripping story.

The most astonishing stories that emerged, however, were the numerous accounts of compassion that ordinary folks showed to absolute strangers. One young 30-something man invited into his home a woman with a baby, a man from India and a college student, all of whom were stranded in front of his apartment. He apologized that he did not have a great amount of food because he was a bachelor and ate out most of the time, but he shared what he had and made comfortable places for each of them to sleep the night in cozy warmth. And when they were finally able to leave the next day, the young man instructed them to call him when they made it home so he wouldn't worry. "I felt like their mother saying that," he chuckled.

It turned out that all over Atlanta the same thing was happening. People who were lucky enough to be in a warm home went out and invited stranded strangers to share their warmth. If people didn't want to come in out of their cars, people did as best they could to bring them blankets and food and water. It was as if there was a sprinkling of love and kindness mixed in the snowflakes.

Story after compelling story was told as people around the country watched the non-stop television coverage. Compassion trumped every other story in this crisis, and I began to wonder why these acts of kindness were so astonishing. Why had these stories risen to the top of the great drama that continued to unfold?

I decided it is because in our typical daily lives our encounters with strangers involve getting out of the way of rude drivers on the freeway, reading heart-breaking stories about bullies in the schools, and witnessing political leaders ridiculing each other. The world condemns those who do not believe that they are the only ones who deserve special consideration.

But those few days in Atlanta, the basic good, the Holy Spirit, was everywhere. It was contagious. As soon as one person began to show compassion, the whole city looked for ways to follow suit. They were not afraid of each other any longer and in no way felt superior. They put on the glasses that Jesus used and realized that every person is a child of God and has dignity and need. And they felt compelled to show God's love without hesitation or accounting.

And if it can happen in Atlanta, it can happen in Dallas. It can happen in our neighborhoods and schools and businesses and church. And we don't have to experience a catastrophe to make it happen. Remember that compassion is contagious, so have fun spreading it around.

March 17 Lent II - Monday

Ralph Cousins

Genesis 41:46-57 Psalm 56, 57 [1 Cor. 4:8-20\(21\)](#) Mark 3:7-19a

Jesus said, "Already you have all you want". (1 Corinthians 4:8)

Each Sunday in Eucharist we say without thinking, "... and of Thine own have we given Thee". Do we really understand that? Do we believe it? Don't we really think that our intelligence, our hard work, our cleverness are the sources of whatever success we have? Do we really have all we want? What is it that you want? What do you really want?

Do you relate to Charlie Anderson (Jimmy Stewart) in the film "Shenandoah"?

"Lord, we cleared this land. We plowed it, sowed it, and harvested it. We cooked the harvest. It wouldn't be here and we wouldn't be eating it if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dog-bone hard for every crumb and morsel, but we thank you Lord just the same for the food we're about to eat. Amen."

How might our lives change if we acknowledged God's role in our lives?

More to the point, how might our relationship with others change if we acknowledge that God is at the heart of all we are, all we do? Might we be more responsive to the troubles, the sufferings of others? Might we be more patient? More understanding? More forgiving?

Might we "come in love with a gentle spirit"? (v.21)

Compassion: sorrow for the suffering of others and the urge to help alleviate this suffering, whether it be physical, spiritual, or emotional.

This is one dictionary's definition of compassion. But, long before there was a dictionary, it is what Jesus commanded of us when he said to "love your neighbor as yourself". God has treated mankind with incredible compassion and love from creation onward, and we are commanded to do the same today. And, that means being compassionate in our interactions with everyone, everywhere. It is the second part of the two great commandments. And if we don't at least try to comply, we are probably not obeying the first part either.

Sounds so easy - so why do I have such a tough time being compassionate? For me, I believe there are two reasons. One is that I was taught to be strong and self-sufficient, and the other is that I enjoy playing God.

I was raised, along with five older brothers, in a small German community at a time when rules were black and white, getting along without help was admired, and being a "cry baby" was not encouraged. Charitable works were definitely expected, but I'm not sure these works were always done in the spirit of selfless compassion. Well, you get the picture.

Over the years, I've learned that the more compassion I am able to incorporate into my life, the more joy I have, and most importantly, the closer I feel to God. I'm aware that I need to slow down and spend my time with others in more deliberate, thoughtful ways: treating service personnel with kindness and thanking them for what they do; sitting quietly with a friend, in their rough times & being a compassionate listener instead of a judge; reordering time with the grandkids - reading, playing games, fishing, and swimming are probably a lot more important than what's for dinner; slowing down when I am with older persons and taking extra time to be with them.

I'm hoping that these small changes will continue to lead to bigger changes. I know that once I slowed down enough to be aware of the difference between charging through life like a bull in a china closet and behaving compassionately I definitely chose the latter because it makes my life so much richer. I also know that it is only through God's grace that I can incorporate these changes in my life.

The author Jay Litvin, writing on the subject of compassion, says that "...it does not require sadness, sorrow or even the desire to help, though it could include all these things. It simply means being fully present with someone no matter the circumstances of his or her life."

Dear God, Thank you for the incredible love and compassion that you have showered upon me each and every day of my life. Help me to share this love and compassion with others. Amen.

On Ash Wednesday, like many of us, I experience a renewed resolve to turn over a new leaf in my personal journey, to be more diligent in prayer, meditation, study and service with the hope of maintaining that Lenten commitment throughout all of the days beyond Lent. What a lofty goal for me but so worthy of just trying! Where do you and I find ourselves now on our Lenten journey exactly two weeks after Ash Wednesday? Invariably each year I seem to stumble on the path as the “stuff” of life crops up like the slivers of weeds that begin to sprout in our gardens. As in the Parable of the Sower, it is our challenge to be so very careful that we sow our seeds of living God’s word in the good soil that will allow God’s word to be heard, to be accepted and to bear fruit.

In today’s reading the Psalmist speaks of delivering the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. How can we meet and serve the needy every day of Lent and for the rest of our days on this earth? The needy may quite simply be our spouse, our children, our grandchildren, our parents, our friends, or our neighbors, but they are also at Jubilee, in Honduras, at Rosebud, at Austin Street Shelter, at Meals on Wheels, in the hospital, nursing homes, etc. The opportunities to serve the needy and to live God’s word through caring for others with kindness and love are literally all around us! And the gifts of our service may be as simple as our presence at a sick friend’s bedside or a smile and a hug for our children.

When my mother recently passed away after a long and courageous battle with her illness, I was absolutely overwhelmed with the out-pouring of comforting words, emails, cards and even text messages that I received. While these all provided me with a loving support that sustained me through my grief and continue to sustain me, the most amazing gift was the warmest feeling in my heart of compassion for others: receiving compassion during such painful times of our own need touches the core of our hearts in the very profound way of moving us to serve others with our own gifts of kindness, love and compassion. A “pay it forward” moment!

In caring for others with kindness and love we share our gifts and our talents with those who are needy and with those who are hurting, and together those who bring compassion and those who receive bear the fruit of God’s word!

Heavenly Father, may I live each day to serve Thee. May I hear Thy Word, accept it and bear the fruit of Thy love to all those whom I encounter this day.

Today's passage from Genesis is part of the story of Joseph's brothers working toward redemption. A couple of verses earlier, Joseph turns away to hide his tears. He must be angry—these are the same brothers who sold him into slavery, yet, they are his family, and so his compassion rises up. The actions he takes—returning their money to them, as well as sending them home with a full-load of grain—are not what a “just” society would recommend. These guys had done a horrific deed...shouldn't they have been punished?

But that's the thing about compassion: in many ways, it often flies in the face of both our societal and familial training.

An example which comes to mind from my own life involves a young girl at my maternal grandmother's funeral. Until the last decade of her life, my mother had not been what she would've called a "huggy person," so when my grandmother died, no one really knew how to comfort Mom. People resisted embracing her, knowing physical displays of affection were not her thing. We all watched in awe, then, when, at the graveside service, one of the youngest cousins—she was probably five or six at the time—stood behind Mom who was seated. Without any coaching and without realizing Mom would have typically asked her not to, this loving child simply placed her hands on Mom's shoulders and kept them there throughout the entire service.

Afterward, my mother commented how unusual this had been for her, and how remarkable she thought it was that such a young child served as her comforter.

That's compassion—when we let our natural human instincts take over instead of making a decision to react in a way that we have been taught or in a way we think we ought to. Today, as you think about what compassion means in your life, I invite you to wonder about the ways you override your own natural sensation of compassion instead of letting God's love flow through you to those around you.



The concept of compassion is about living the Golden Rule: living in a society that treats all of its members with respect, consideration, encouragement, equality, kindness, sympathy, empathy, or simply as one would like to be treated by others.

Since the focus for this Lenten season is the concept of compassion, I reached back in my memory and found that not all of the instances of compassion that I had witnessed were the expected ones of sympathy, but often were ones of kindness and encouragement and inclusion.

I remember my high school journalism teacher who put my name forth encouraging me to interview for an internship at the local newspaper. A job I'd never have dreamed of having was mine to pursue. That encouragement set me on a career path that has been with me for life.

I remember my first 'boss' at that newspaper, who daily and informally counseled with me regarding my goals in life and treated me with respect. His interest in me, a green youngster, helped me to have a new view of who I was and about being intentional with my life.

I am grateful to the supervisor who was a model of unbiased behavior and showed it publicly on television at a critical time in the early 60's. Her radical examples of teaching by exhibiting inclusiveness have affected my own attitudes toward human rights.

I smile thinking of the young woman who, on first meeting me when I was 'new in town' and feeling lost, invited me to "come sit with her" at a women's club meeting. She took me under her wing and introduced me to others in that group. That simple compassionate act made the difference in my belonging.

Later, I was grateful for the nephew who came to my rescue when my business was under attack. He introduced me to the proper professionals and stayed by my side through tedious meetings with attorneys and accountants, taking time away from his own job. That act of compassion made the difference in my financial recovery.

I think of my sweet friend who, after inviting me to come to Saint Michael when she knew I craved a church home, didn't push me but sat with me through the Inquirers class. She supported me in my desire to come back to the church. Betsy, now deceased, introduced me to this cup of joy that

my husband and I have since been honored to take to others as LEV's here at Saint Michael. Her support has made an impact on my spiritual life.

I thank God for the compassion shown by the youngster who befriended Travis, my grandson, born with craniofacial and other physical handicaps, and to the other children who joined in this hospitality. They invited him to their birthday parties and came to his. I am grateful to these children and their parents who treated Travis as a normal kid, who walked right up to him to say 'hello' and didn't wince or look away from his unsightly surgical scars. He was included as part of a group.

Compassion has different faces and I've been blessed to see many of them.

One of the Brothers at the Society of Saint John the Evangelist expressed it this way: "Whether or not we are in grief or pain, Jesus is the compassionate One, and in him we can find hope and comfort and new life."

I pray that you not only receive the gifts of compassion but that you experience living a compassionate life.

Not long ago, a member of my family suffered a fairly serious accident, and in the aftermath, we were gratified by the heartfelt and generous response of many of our friends, family, neighbors, and parish family. We were the recipients of phone calls, food, cards and visits not to mention prayers in the days to follow. All these gestures were comforting, compassionate, and affirming. One person's response stands out particularly to me now that time has passed as I continue to reflect on this experience.

Perhaps a month after the accident, I thought to call an old childhood friend to tell her what had happened. We often chat over the phone or text and I had realized that, living out of town, she probably had not heard the news and would want to know. She is a strong Christian brought up in the Church of Christ. Her faith has helped her through the trials and tribulations of life and she maintains a positive spirit in all things. We always have such a good time sharing memories of our childhood and news about our families. Once I gave her my news and we talked a bit, she asked if she could pray with me. I must admit, while I am sure our family had been in many good peoples' prayers, no one had yet asked to pray with me over the phone. As a member of the "frozen chosen", I was a bit surprised, but in my time of need, never felt more like I needed it.

It was a quick prayer, a simple prayer, thanking God for the survival of our family member, and asking God to comfort and strengthen all of us during the recovery. When she was done, I felt that a burden had been lifted and that my family was not alone in this. It was her *presence* that made the difference, her intimate sharing with me in this pain as if we stood together and laid it at the altar; and it has not ceased to inspire and comfort me even months after the event.

Dear God, I pray that I may be fully present in your presence and may share that presence with others in their time of need, Amen.

In 1996 President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. The Act contained a provision for temporary cash assistance to low-income parents and their children called TANF: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Senator Gramm added an amendment to the Act denying these benefits to people convicted in a state or federal court of a felony drug offense. The ban applies only to drugs, not to murder or rape or any other felony offense. Significantly, the ban is a lifetime ban. In criminal justice circles this is known as an invisible punishment – a sanction that extends far beyond sentencing. States were given the opportunity to opt out of the ban and 38 did. Texas has not.

Prison populations in the US have risen dramatically since 1980. Between 1980 and 2010 the number of women in prison rose by a shocking 646% (the male prison population rose by 419%). Twenty-five percent of the women in prison were incarcerated for drug offenses. And, since the vast majority of TANF recipients are women (86% in 2009), the Gramm ban disproportionately affects women and their children. The ban adversely affects 180,000 women – 65,000 in Texas alone!

Added to the issue of gender is race. Data collected by the Department of Health and Human Services has consistently shown that whites, African Americans, and Latinos use drugs at comparable rates. Yet, if you are Black and in Texas, you are twice as likely to be stopped for drugs, and, in Dallas County, three times more likely than to be arrested. Remember, Texas has the nation's largest prison population: 152,000 people incarcerated in 2012. Of those, 36% are African American even though African Americans represent only 12% of our state's population. Race matters.

Compassion is a powerful awareness of another's suffering coupled with a determination to alleviate that suffering. This determination fuels action, Karen Armstrong's sixth step of compassion. Compassion in action is mercy. Jesus equated mercy with love when he taught about the Samaritan who lifted the stranger from the ditch, provided care, and helped him heal. Mercy is the hoped-for response of Christians to God's commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Thousands of people convicted of drug offenses leave Texas jails and prisons every year, often finding themselves in ditches of joblessness, homelessness, and hunger. By allowing the ban, are we complicit in deepening these ditches, or worse, in fencing people in?

Collectively we people of Saint Michael hold great power and influence in this state. Together we have the power to influence our legislators to remove the TANF ban, to align ourselves with the vast majority of states that have recognized the inhumanity of the ban and how it contributes to recidivism. We have the opportunity to put compassion into action, to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Who will lead us to Austin? Who will strike the rock so that "water will come out of it, so that the people may drink?"

God, grant us courage to love as the Samaritan loved.

When I think of true compassion, I remember back to 2004-2006 when my mother had a massive stroke and was bedridden for the rest of her life. All the doctors and nurses she had were wonderful and very caring and compassionate. The one lady I especially remember was toward the end of Mother's life. She was a 30-ish hospice aide who came once a day during the week to the nursing home to bathe my mom. She was a Katrina refugee and had such a heavy Cajun/creole drawl, that I could hardly understand her at times. She said my mom reminded her of her grandmother. She was there each day and so caring and loving and always in a wonderful mood, which I couldn't believe after what she had been through.

She took such care with my mother each day, washing her hair and talking to her—even though she didn't get much response. After a while, I could tell my mother looked forward to her visits each day because she would light up and smile when she heard her voice and say, "Oh, Hi Darlin'" as though they were best friends.

This aide would talk to us about how much she loved being in Dallas and starting over. She said she loved being in a really big city with so much to offer. I am certain she didn't have much money to take advantage of the many options she now had, but she was so happy to be here – even though she had lost everything she owned. She brought so much love and friendship into the little room, and you could tell she really loved caring for others.

I think sometimes we forget how much the small favors and friendly remarks to people we see each day can brighten their day when things might not be so good for them. This girl didn't have a care in the world except for taking care of her patients, all of whom would be gone soon. Her grace showed true compassion and I will never forget her.

Joseph was sold into slavery by his own brothers. Years later, they had a surprise meeting in Egypt when Joseph had authority over distributing food during a time of famine. His brothers came in need of help. They didn't know Joseph, but he knew them. He could have quietly denied them food. He could have confronted them and reminded them of what they did to him. But instead of trying to even the score, Joseph took compassion on his brothers, gave them food, and forgave them.

When I was sixteen, I drove my family's yellow jeep. I grew up in Central Florida in a citrus community. In the middle of a large orange grove on the edge of town there was a large open sand pit about the size of an Olympic swimming pool. Several of my friends and I thought that it would be fun to drive our jeeps into and out of the sand pit. Entries to the pit ranged from shallow to almost vertical. As we drove, our sense of adventure increased until we decided it would be a great challenge to exit the pit at its steepest point. We lined up in the base of the pit. One of our friends stood at the top edge and signaled "all clear" for the first in line.

He sped toward the steep incline, flew through the air, then landed out of the pit and out of sight to those of us that remained in line. The second jeep followed the first, and then it was my turn. "All clear"! I raced toward the wall of the pit and a moment later the jeep was in full flight. Then the jeep crashed to the earth and the hard top jarred free from the frame. I only learned then that the first two drivers had experienced trials of their own—the first a broken axel and the second a lost oil pan. I drove the car home, and on the way fabricated a story to tell my dad: a tourist from Michigan stopped suddenly in front of me forcing me into the curb and jarring the hard top from the frame.

Well...believe it or not, he bought it. And for a week, I got away with it. Then, I came home and saw my dad in the garage cleaning out the jeep. My stomach sank as I ducked into the house. Would he find it? A few minutes later, he came into the kitchen with the picture in his hand - the picture my friend took of me in the jeep in mid-air! The questions started. "Is this a picture of our jeep?" "Yessir" "Is the jeep in the air?" "Yessir" "Is this how the hard top got broken?" "Yessir"

*****Silence*****

Then my dad laid the picture down and said, "Son, I am disappointed that you would lie to me." He never said another word about it. He could have yelled. He could have grounded me. But his approach, whether wise or compassionate or both had a deeper impact on me. I remember it to this day. I never lied to him again. And it shaped how I parent my own children.

Thanks Dad. Thanks Joseph. And thanks be to God for your compassion and mercy. We don't deserve it, but we all need it.

There's not a whole lot of compassion evidenced in any of today's readings, unless you count Paul's polite consideration (in Corinthians) of his vegetarian friends, which sounds not unlike my grudging respect for our daughter's vegetarianism. Surely Herod's getting John's head on a silver platter for Herodias has none of the hallmarks of the justice, equity and respect that define compassion. Nor is Joseph's triumph in Egypt over his brothers' malice and over what might have been understandably vindictive feelings of his own a story of human compassion. The Old Testament writers make the whole thing – even the selling of Joseph into slavery – God's doing. And Psalm 119, a clever literary meditation on the law does not, unfortunately, address the *spirit* of the law, where compassion might, in fact, have come into play. So I am left without any obvious material from which I might tease out suggestions, even glimmers of how compassion worked in Biblical times, what it looked like, what role it had in community life or in a life of faith throughout the centuries, much less any inspiration for what it might be today.

This creates a bit of a challenge for this reflection. I looked to the assigned Bible verses hoping I'd find what I was looking for relative to the topic compassion precisely because it's so terribly hard to find suggestions or even glimmers of compassion in our everyday world. And what I found instead— as we often do in the ancient texts – was merely a mirror: all the same bad news I see in the newspapers, on television, online, and in the power structure, political system and culture of today. Prejudice, bigotry, deceit, hate, vengeance, power struggles, inequality and misplaced values. Who's right? Who's righteous? Who's self-righteous? Who understands that none of that – the being right or righteous – really matters? Who among us “gets” that walking in another's shoes neither requires nor begets power and/or knowledge, but is, instead, an act of love, a gift of presence that can, mysteriously and miraculously, often make the difference? It just isn't clear – in the texts or in our world of today.

The lesson for me here is that if we work with only what we are given, be it a specific text, a debilitating diagnosis or an onerous piece of legislation, we will be hard-pressed to know what to do to live more compassionately, to live into love of God, love of self and of one another. Instead, I believe, we have to look beyond what we expect and what is expected of us, dare to step outside our carefully constructed place in our family or our community and, in fact, physically or mentally and/or emotionally walk in another's shoes, to find the peace, justice and love that compassion promises. Compassion isn't sympathy or charity; it isn't a skill set or an interpersonal tool; it isn't ours to give (as if we have it and some less enlightened, less powerful, less economically advantaged person doesn't); it is, rather, ours to experience – as much for ourselves as for others. I know compassion's power when I find myself acting almost on instinct, responding to a thought that crosses my mind to be with someone and feeling, once I am there, that I am exactly where I should be, doing exactly what I should be doing -- which is a rare and very good feeling. And precisely because it is so rare, I believe every single act of compassion, which is love – our love for one another and God's love for us -- can make a difference. I hope and pray.

“Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Mark 6:30-46)

Compassion. This verse from the Gospel of Mark is interesting to me in two ways: first, it says nothing about how one feels toward the other person; it has nothing at all to do with empathy, or even sympathy. Second, it speaks only about action: ‘Do...’

When I meditate on Compassion as an action verb, the person who comes into my mind most often is my husband, Doug.

I thought back on the time that I was extremely ill with an eye disease, *acanthamoeba keratitis*: I had a parasite in my left eye. Basically, parasites travel across the nerve endings of the cornea of the eye, then up to the nerves in the brain. The patient suffers from extreme eye pain, headaches and blindness. For half a year, I was completely ‘out of commission’. Every pain medicine that the doctors sent out made me violently ill. Doug not only cleaned up after all my sickness, he did everything else, including tending to our boys, and he carried me in his arms to all my doctor appointments, because I had become so thin and frail.

I remembered the time that our sons, Miles and Parrish, were stuck on the Black Diamond ski slopes during a sudden blizzard. One son made it down, then skied back up to find his little brother. Eventually, everyone on the slopes had made it down but our sons, so the ski patrol went up to find them. While I stayed in the lodge praying and drinking hot chocolate, Doug, suffering from a horrible winter cold at the time, stood as straight as a soldier down at the foot of the slopes in the blizzard waiting for our boys to arrive safely down. I watched from the windows as he stood and stood, straight as an arrow, until they were safe.

But perhaps the greatest times that Doug showed compassion in action were the years that he coached Chamber Baseball. Unlike other coaches, who always just picked the best players, Doug picked congenial families and took the boys that came with them. This meant that Doug often got little boys who were afraid of the ball, didn’t know one end of a bat from the other, and were, to say the least, significantly ADHD. Doug worked and worked with these little boys, practice after practice, as a team and just one-on-one, week after week, game after game, year after year. He had such patience with them, was so encouraging, lifted their spirits in so many daily ways, that he turned them into fantastic players. They won every Championship, in the top league, every year. Most of all, they learned that someone cared enough about them to help them to be good in anything they worked hard enough for. They grew in self-confidence. Eventually, Doug even had to teach them how to treat the teams they beat with kindness, because they had no idea what it felt like to lose.

You may think that all husbands and fathers and kids’ sports coaches would act in these ways, but I have seen that they do not.

“Do to others as you would have them do to you...”

In July, my granddaughter, Caroline Beutel – a sophomore at Episcopal School of Dallas, was driving to Austin on I-35 with her parents. As they drove past West, they began talking about the fertilizer plant explosion that had devastated the small town earlier that spring. In addition to the lives lost and homes and businesses damaged, they talked about the three school buildings and everything in them that were destroyed. Temporary buildings would be used to start the year, but where would the teachers get their materials – the posters, the maps, the giant alphabet letters, the games used to make learning fun?

Caroline was moved to help. She launched a drive to raise money to buy the materials from family and friends. She got the ESD football team to join her, competing among themselves for donations. The winning players got Cupcakes from Caroline and a day's reprieve from running sprints at practice. Working through her mom, a Highland Park School District administrator, she solicited gently used educational materials from elementary school teachers. Her friends pitched in helping collect all the donations.

On August 23, a couple of weeks before school started, Caroline and her parents were on I-35 again, this time pulling a U-Haul trailer filled with magnetic letters, books, games, and all the tools the West elementary teachers needed to start the year. She also delivered a check for more than \$2,000.

Lessons learned:

- 1 **Compassion requires action.** Whether responding to the needs of teachers in West or a simple “thank you” to a school crossing guard, compassion means something good will happen.
- 2 **Compassion is catching.** Compassion doesn't end with a single act. It's like a row of dominoes, push one over and they all fall in line.
- 3 **Compassion is not adult.** “Let the little children (the youth) come to me...because the kingdom of heaven belongs to people like these.” Matthew 19:14

She is lost.
Not knowing what comes next.
She feels alone.
The love of her life is gone.
What will she do?
Her six children are grown.
They have moved away.
Has many grandchildren.
Still feels alone.
My heart goes out to her.
In her time of need.
She had never shown love.
At least not to me.
But, my heart hurts.
What must it be like?
To have everyone around you.
And still feel alone.

*God, may she have peace.
And once she does, may she realize that
she has never been alone. Amen.*

March 30 Fourth Sunday of Lent

Madelyn Brinkley

I Samuel 16:1-13 Psalm 23 Ephesians 5:8-14 John 9:1-41

The Old Testament is the New Testament concealed and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed! This is one of the earliest memory phrases that was drummed into me over and over as I began my lifelong faith walk and introduction to my lifelong study of the Bible. It was true then and is true today that whenever I read scripture and particularly when I re-read a specific passage of scripture, God reveals Himself (or Herself depending on my need at the moment) anew as if I had never read the passage before! Each reading brings about a newness which often leaves me wondering, “how did I miss that”?

While I in no way even remotely fashion myself to be any sort of even minor Bible scholar, I am nevertheless a most avid Bible reader and re-reader. My reading of the scripture lessons for today left me with a need for further study on “spiritual blindness”. I am struck with continued amazement of the revelations in both the Old and New Testament on the subject. Despite our Christianity, we can so easily be “blinded” from seeing the true Christ of love, joy, compassion, peace, and reconciliation. The realization that not to see Christ is not to see God should inspire each of us as Christians to remain constantly vigilant and on the alert. I am honored to be able to share my revelations as meditations with you and trust they will bring revelation for you as well. I find the words in today’s scripture lessons to be like all scripture, offering words of comfort, wisdom and discernment and serving as a much-needed guidepost in which God not only corrects but also lovingly but most definitely chastises me — and all to His edification and glory which is filled with love, compassion, grace and unmerited favor.

On April 27 I will mark my eleventh year of reception into the Episcopal Church. Moreover this year marks my sixtieth year of growing in Christ after having openly professed the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior. I am therefore in continued awe and wonder when I read that “spiritual blindness” is so very prevalent among fervent members of Christ’s own church. My prayer therefore always includes the question: “Lord — is it I?” As Christians, we must always be constantly on the lookout and alert to the fact that “spiritual blindness” can slip in as a thief in the night and overtake our thoughts and motives.

To God be the glory.

I find the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman provocative. When this Gentile woman begged Jesus to heal her daughter, Jesus said, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She responded, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Jesus responded, "For this saying, you may go – the demon has left your daughter." Thus, Jesus healed the mother's girl.

For a culture suffering from the idolatry of success as ours does, this story is disturbing. Did Jesus lose an argument? How could the Son of God be beaten? Bested by a Gentile woman?

Don't misunderstand me. Success is a good thing. If it weren't good, it would not become an idol. Our obsession with success and winning, however, has the drawbacks that accompany idolatry. Competition trumps compassion.

While teaching in a demanding preparatory school, I found many students became fixated on their transcripts. If the transcript is the main point, a student may as well cheat. Excessive stress plagued those who identified their worth in terms of grades. I'd ask students, "How was the game?" They would reply, "We won" or "We lost." I did not ask about the score; I asked about the game. Does anyone "play" games anymore? I'm sure that in sports, business, or politics you can think of many ways in which the need to win becomes destructive.

Success was not Jesus' goal. The crucifixion proves that. Compassion was his priority. In compassion he listened to a foreign woman, one who could be regarded as "the other." He left space for her, heard her, changed, and expanded his ministry.

Compassion is crucial to careful listening. Compassion encourages us to pay attention – not to defend our opinion, not to produce a witty retort, not to win a debate. Compassion entails the vulnerability to admit that we don't know, that we may have to change. It requires us to hold another person in love, a love that is stronger than our cherished beliefs or need to succeed. This is the kind of listening practiced by Stephen Ministers. It is not easy. Continually I have to remind myself, "You can hear a lot by listening."

Compassionate God, who has repeatedly turned to redeem us, we thank you for sending your Son who has shown us how to live with focus, openness, and vulnerability. Give us the courage to risk failure and to listen with care in order to serve with trust, faithfulness, and compassion. Amen.

Today's Psalms sing of justice as the cornerstone of God's Kingdom. How do we bring about Kingdom justice here on earth? Our readings suggest it starts with compassion. Jesus has compassion for the hungry crowds (Mark 8), and Paul rebukes the humiliation of those who have nothing to eat at the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11). Perhaps we, too, can start with compassion for hungry people.

Recent congressional cuts to food programs for poor people may indicate compassion is in short supply these days. By God's grace, few in our congregation know what it's like to live with persistent hunger or have experienced the insidious connection between food insecurity and obesity. Do first-hand personal experiences of persistent hunger make compassion easier to muster?

I'm unsure, but either way, compassion for hungry people is a low rung on the ladder. While it's relatively easy to feel compassion for hungry children born into poverty through no fault of their own, it's harder to do so for adults suffering bad consequences from their own bad choices, and harder still for those who harmed us directly in some lasting and painful way.

A conversation with a woman in the Dallas county jail illuminates a fine point. Almost all the women I meet in jail are incarcerated for drug offenses, and a great many of those turned to drugs in the wake of child abuse and neglect. Lauren (name changed) was in that camp. Her alcoholic mother, preoccupied with her own dramas, was abusive and allowed Lauren to be sexually abused.

During a worship service a local congregation provides for inmates, Lauren forgave her mother for the abuse. It wasn't about her mother so much as it was about Lauren straightening out her relationship with God. Her anger and resentment were getting in the way. Lauren described feeling lighter, as if chains wrapped around her arms and legs had fallen off in an instant. Her mother died years ago, but Lauren's experience was as powerful as if she had spoken to her mother directly. Without resentment blinding her, Lauren realized her mother suffered the same kinds of child abuse as Lauren. She saw threads of both victim and perpetrator weaving through the tangle of her mother's sad life.

I lingered over something Lauren said. Having compassion for her mother didn't allow Lauren to release resentment. Rather, releasing resentment allowed Lauren to see her mother's reality more clearly, and that gave way to compassion. Forgiveness came first.

Issues like food insecurity, poverty, addiction and incarceration can make Kingdom justice seem hopelessly out of reach. It's not. There is action each one of us can take. During this introspective season, do you see stray threads of resentment or misunderstanding holding you back from living out your relationship with God? You can forgive and have compassion! Scripture assures us God's kingdom of mercy and forgiveness is open to all who extend mercy and forgive. Those first steps free our hearts to act for what is just and right.

My pink coat seemed to endow me with a certain aura. Perhaps that is the intention.

As I entered the hospital, where I served in the intensive care waiting room as a volunteer, I was greeted with a certain deference and kindness. As I exited the elevator on my floor, the expectation was palpable. "Here comes the fixer." The coffee pot needed attention, the cream and sugar supply had dwindled, the soft drink machine was not working. Could I watch this suitcase or set of blankets? Could I be sure so and so got a particular message and could I restore order in the waiting room? But, mostly, I was supposed to ameliorate the fear.

Patients in the ICU are ministered to and monitored by a panoply of nurses, doctors, technicians, secretaries, and janitors. It is an army of support.

Their families are in the waiting room eager and anxious for a look at their loved one and for an assurance that all will be well. They are all afraid and the fear is manifested in countless ways:

Some, unable to relate, stare at the TV or into space.

Some relate to others in the waiting room and some relate to the volunteer.

The story is told, in great detail and with grief for their loved one and for themselves. It is wrenching.

And then, for some, there is anger- toward the doctors, the staff and even the volunteer, demanding to know what is in it for him or her.

It is impossible to allay the fear. But one's presence is possible and the ability to listen with an open heart and mind is possible. I was able to do that. These families were my charges and I was responsible for them. I was the gateway to those caring for their people. But they fed my soul. They shared their joys and sorrows and brought me into their lives. I became a part of their story.

The years I spent wearing that pink coat have meant everything to me. Turns out, the coat was much more than a garment. It was the symbol of my weekly opportunity to understand what it means to be a part of the whole. And, to know what was in it for me.

I wish I could have explained it to the man who asked.

Dear God, make me always in the "pink coat mode", ready to listen and be present with an open heart and mind. Amen

April 3 Lent IV - Thursday

Exodus 1:6-22 Psalm 69: 1-23, 31-38 I Cor. 12:12-26 Mark 8:27-9:1

“Beannacht” by John O’Donohue, from *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*. © Doubleday, 2008. The poem is listed in the book as a blessing for the New Year.

On the day when
The weight deadens
On your shoulders
And you stumble,
May the clay dance
To balance you.

And when your eyes
Freeze behind
The grey window
And the ghost of loss
Gets in to you,
May a flock of colours,
Indigo, red, green,
And azure blue,
Come to awaken in you
A meadow of delight.

When the canvas frays
In the currach of thought
And a stain of ocean
Blackens beneath you,
May there come across the waters
A path of yellow moonlight
To bring you safely home.

May the nourishment of the earth be yours,
May the clarity of light be yours,
May the fluency of the ocean be yours,
May the protection of the ancestors be yours.

And so may a slow
Wind work these words
Of love around you,
An invisible cloak
To mind your life.

No matter how many times one says, "I'm sorry", sometimes there is no way to make things as they once were.

St. Paul is writing to the church in Corinth and encouraging better behavior from a faith community that has strayed from the norms of conduct Paul himself instituted. To read the whole of chapter twelve, one gets the impression that this particular church has become enamored by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. There may also be some "competition" between church members around who might have the most prestigious gift.

Paul writes forcefully that one could have the most amazing manifestations of the Spirit and even then, he or she could be out of sync with the local Body of Christ. Love, Paul writes, is the one thing that overrides even the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Love is the "more excellent way" because it is patient and kind...it bears all things.

In my second year of seminary, I spent some time as a hospital chaplain trainee. I was on duty in the E.R. when an ambulance carrying the victim of a horrible construction accident arrived. Immediately the victim, John, was taken to a trauma room. About twenty steps behind John's gurney was another man, Ben, dressed in dirty work clothes. I shook Ben's dusty hand and noticed his strained and tear-streaked face. They were partners on a highway construction job just south of town, and he was grieving for his friend.

The two men, John and Ben, had been paired that day as a team. Working about forty feet off the ground, John was leaning over as his friend bumped him from behind, pushing John down into a tubular cement form used to create the overpass support column.

I got to know John and his family over the length of his hospital stay. For three months, the two men were often together in that hospital room, talking. I would sometimes see John lying motionless, perhaps asleep, while Ben stood watch over him. By the time John was ready to be discharged it was known that he was paralyzed and would never work again. Even in the midst of that hard news, it was clear that there had been a reconciliation of sorts between John and Ben. There was still anger just under the surface but a step had been taken.

John, somehow, had the wherewithal to see outside of his own issues, notice his friend's grief and offer forgiveness. John's model of compassion changed me then and continues to inspire me to love deeper and forgive more often. Life can seem overwhelming at times for any one of us – we all have been there at some point. When I am hurt, when I don't believe I can faithfully go on, I draw strength from the God-work I saw between John and Ben.

"Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." 1 Cor. 13:7

In my work as a youth minister I get to share a lot of life with young people. Every week our different groups share their highs and lows, prayer concerns, etc. Each week our young people share their concerns which almost always include too much homework or stress about a test. Often a big game or performance is mentioned. Once in a while a young person shares a high about their driver's license, college acceptance, or good news about a crush.

It's easy to discount these concerns and celebrations of young people. Having been through many of them myself and hearing many kids have similar stories over the years, there's not much newness to the stories. I often have a story that can top theirs or an example from my own current life of being busier or having a bigger project.

Thankfully, due to some wise mentors long ago, I know better than to top the stories of the middle school kids (how hard is that, really). That's not what they need, and it's not really sharing life with them. A compassionate response, as my mentors taught me over the years, is to listen to their joys and pains, as minor and inconsequential as they may seem. These big events happening in their lives are the biggest thing to happen to them so far: their biggest game, their biggest test, their biggest crush. It's a big deal, though it often doesn't seem so to my more seasoned perspective.

Occasionally the highs and lows get very serious and include concerns about a sick grandparent or friend. At these moments, the compassion is more naturally present for everyone in the room. Often the context of the less serious moments helps us connect and provide a context for their sharing.

Our middle school and high school students provide a nice example of what we could do for everyone around us. Everyone has a little middle schooler inside of them, wanting people to share their joys and pains with. People experiencing new highs and lows each day that they want someone to come alongside them and say "this is a big deal for you, I get it."

It's been said that uninteresting people talk about the weather, interesting people talk about ideas. I wonder what kind of things people talk about that inspires a compassionate response from each other?



Marcus Borg in his book "Speaking Christian", says compassion is " more than a feeling; it includes acting in accord with that feeling...To be compassionate is to be womb-like: life-giving, nourishing, perhaps, embracing, and encompassing."

When I was in my mid-twenties, I was involved in a bad car crash. On a bright and sunny Monday morning, I was driving north on the Tollway to work. I remember thinking at the time life was full of promise and possibilities.

As I was crossing over Lemmon Avenue, I came suddenly upon a car almost stopped in front of me. I swerved into the other lane and the rest was history... I found myself upside down in my overturned car with no seat belt. Somehow I managed to slide out of the smoking car. My head was bleeding profusely. Suddenly out of nowhere, two angels appeared. One was a RN going to work. The other, also an RN named Herndecine, was dressed in a beautiful outfit, as I remember. Both stopped immediately to help me that morning on that busy Tollway. Herndecine insisted that I get in the back of her white Cadillac to wait for the ambulance. I resisted, saying I did not want to mess up her white leather seats. When I gave in, lying down in the back seat of her car felt truly womb-like. I felt the nurturing care of a stranger. Fortunately, I came away with only a deep gash to my head, yet the car was completely totaled my brother later told me.

Five years before this I was given permission to have a car at college. In late summer, my father and I went and picked out the car I wanted-the make, the color etc. Our deal was that it would be driven up east where I was at school later in the Fall when the color/make was available. I called home in late Fall and asked what had happened to the car as it had not arrived. My Dad replied that he had changed his mind about allowing me to have such a car. He had a friend whose daughter had driven such a car-a small Fiat-and she had been in a bad accident. He told me he had returned the car to the dealership. He wanted me to drive a safer car with more steel. I was most disappointed and I remember feeling quite betrayed.

To this day, I thank God, that my father made that decision, as it is likely I would not have survived that crash in the little car I had so wanted at first.

I have stayed in touch with both RN's, Mrs. Nash and Mrs. Grimes over these many years. I could not fathom that they would stop for me-just because I was hurt and needed help. Of course, that

was their training, but I also have come to learn what beautiful and compassionate souls they each are. What a gift I received that day!

My father was perhaps the most compassionate person I ever had the good fortune to know. Watching him from afar and up close as his youngest daughter was a privilege. Many who knew him will attest to this. The fact that he insisted I drive a safer car was just part of who he was. That decision likely saved my life.

Compassion is about doing the little things and the big things we do every day, for those with whom our lives are intertwined, both friend and stranger.

As Sharon Salzberg expresses it in her book called "Faith", "what any of us do right now has an effect over the reaches of time and space. Even when we feel helpless, we can find support in this truth. We can, with love and compassion, continue to offer our hearts beyond the hurdle of pain, stirred by faith to act the best we can in the life we all share together." Amen!

Teacher," said John, "we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." Mark 9:38

Busted! The good Lord knows my prejudices and predilections! Who do you/I want to stop because they are not one of us: youth, people with opposing opinions/perspectives, people who are attracted to their own gender, followers of Islam?

By such exclusiveness could we possibly be denying the very essence and diversity of such human beings thereby imposing our notion upon God's plan? What if the next time we are in the presence of those described above we stop and offer them a "cup of acceptance"?

Moses said, "Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue ... Send someone else". Exodus 4:10

Public speaking and daily reminders of gifts that are lacking are joys that I share in common with most people.

But when God calls us to participate in His Deliverance, scriptures reveal that doing otherwise results in a fishy predicament finding us spit up on shores leading to the path we tried to avoid. Scriptures also remind us that a call is accompanied by a promise of His presence on the chosen path. As was done with the call to Moses, the Lord may provide an "Aaron" who greets us with a kiss and upon hearing our news agrees to join us on our journey.

Remember, there will be times when the staff of God will be offered to you or to me. Our response is to pick up the staff and to follow Him.



Compassion means to enter into another's suffering and to somehow help carry the load. You can't take away another's pain, but you can help them bear it. It goes beyond the mere recognition of suffering and sympathy for it, anguish even. It is an *active* noun; one might even go on to say it is a noun transfigured into a verb. Compassion seizes the opportunity, a rush of the spirit to help. It is one-on-one or more exactly one *for* one.

The Benedictine nun, Joan Chittister, comments, "Compassion is not nodding 'yes, yes' behind the daily newspaper while someone stands in front of us trying to have their heart heard." I would say that compassion usually comes in a rush, unthought out, and unstudied, as quick as a knee jerk and as unplanned, stronger than planning, instinctual.

I think of an example I keep at hand, which never ceases to bring tears to my eyes and to anyone with whom I have shared it. It happened at the Seattle Special Olympics a few years ago:

Nine contestants, all physically or mentally disabled, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun, they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with a relish to run the race to the finish and win. All, that is, but one boy who stumbled on the asphalt and began to cry. The other eight heard the boy cry. They slowed down and looked back. Then they all turned around and went back. Every one of them. One girl with Down's Syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, "This will make it better" Then all nine linked arms and walked to the finish line. Everyone in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on for several minutes.

People who were there are still telling the story. Why? Because deep down we know this one thing: What matters in life is more than winning for ourselves. What truly matters in this life is helping others win, even if it means slowing down and changing our course. Joan Chittister quotes Mary Webb who wrote, "If you stop to be kind you must swerve often from your path", and Joan adds, "The truth is that most kindness interrupts our personal agendas. Kindness is what we do when we should be doing something else."

I am reminded of those members of a sports team, when a teammate had lost his hair with the ravages of chemotherapy, in compassionate solidarity shaving off their own hair in compassion and

in identification with suffering. They entered into their teammate's misery and lessened the sting and the shame.

Compassion is the heart reaching out to the injured heart, love graciously bestowed, asking no reward.

I do not forget that there are examples of compassion close to home, daily done in our parish.

My godchild, who would be mortified if I used her name, because the good she does is quietly done without fanfare or recognition, volunteers as an advocate for cruelly abused, neglected and battered children. She goes to court for them; she goes to bat for them. She sees that a raped or abused or battered child finds shelter and safety and a chance to heal.

I found out about her work by accident. Compassion, it seems to me, does not toot its own horn, does not call attention to itself, does not seek kudos or recognition but gives quietly and with generosity.

I think of our Meals on Wheels volunteers, driving out of their neighborhoods, bringing food and cheer to the disabled. I think of Jubilee volunteers who tutor and serve children and give them a leg up. I know firsthand what a lift of spirit it is to have a meal from Ann Mills' legion of cooks who deliver wonderful full-coursed dinners brought to the ailing, the bone broken disabled, the bone weary, the new mother overwhelmed with new responsibility and sleeplessness, the patients recovering from surgery. One volunteer brought Henry and myself, along with her glorious meal, a vase of sunflowers which lasted ten days giving sunny cheer: given in love by a person we *did not know*. Compassion is all about love.

I like to think what this world, this country, this city would look like if John Wesley's injunction were followed:

Do all the good you can
By all the means you can
In all the ways you can
At all the times you can
As long as ever you can.

And I humbly add, YOU CAN

From COMPASSION by Henri J. M. Nouwen, Donald P. McNeill and Douglas A. Morrison, Chapter 2

*His state was divine,
Yet he did not cling to his equality with God
But emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave,
And became as we are;
And being as we are, he was humbler yet,
Even to accepting death, death on a cross. (Phil 2:6-8)*

But it is not said of Jesus that he reached down from on high to pull us up from slavery, but that he became a slave with us. God's compassion is a compassion that reveals itself in servanthood. Jesus became subject to the same power and influences that dominate us, and suffered our fears, uncertainties, and anxieties with us. Jesus emptied himself. He gave up a privileged position, a position of majesty and power and assumed fully and without reservation a condition of total dependency. Paul's hymn of Christ does not ask us to look upward, away from our condition, but to look in our midst and discover God there.

....Jesus' compassion is characterized by a downward pull. That is what disturbs us. We cannot even think about ourselves in terms other than those of an upward pull, an upward mobility.... Thus we are deeply disturbed by a God who embodies a downward movement. ... Jesus moves, as Karl Barth says, from "The heights to the depth, from victory to defeat, from riches to poverty, from triumph to suffering, from life to death".

... Compassion ... is not a bending toward the underprivileged 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 more acute and building a home there. ...It is the compassion of the one who keeps going to the most forgotten corners of the world, and who cannot rest as long as there are still human beings with tears in their eyes.

... Becoming a servant is not an exception to Godhood. Self-emptying and humiliation are not a step away from God's true nature. Becoming as we are and dying on a cross is not a temporary interruption of God's own divine existence. Rather, in the emptied and humbled Christ we encounter God, we see who God really is, we come to know true divinity.

.....We begin to understand that to follow Jesus is to participate in the ongoing self-revelation of God. ...We become people in whose lives the compassionate presence of God in this world can manifest itself.

A long time ago when I was young and newly married, my husband and I experienced the loss of our first born baby, totally unexpected at a time before ultrasounds might have given a warning.

We both had lived charmed lives in the 40's and 50's with very few struggles through childhood and began adulthood in the warm loving support of family and friends. During that saddest time of my life, so far, I have a vivid memory that I still cannot quite explain or understand. Several times in the early morning in the hospital before dawn I was aware of a lovely young woman sitting in a chair beside my bed smiling. When my eyes groggily opened, she would reach out her hand and simply place it on my arm, never saying a word.

All I can say is that I felt a compassionate touch which I still remember to this day. She came several mornings that week in the hospital. Was she a nurse that had been in the delivery room and had some time off before her night shift ended? Was she perhaps an angel? I will never know! And, of course I never saw her in the light of day.

But I do know that sometimes a touch can say more than words. I learned the importance of 'showing up' even when you don't know what to say in difficult situations like so many of my friends did at the time of this story. In fact, I am still aware of a compassionate smile from another or a gentle touch on the shoulder or arm when things go wrong. In these later years of my life, I am married to a man who has reached out his arm many times when I goof and am misunderstood by a careless action or word toward another. It's just a touch, but the warmth goes right to my heart to heal and gives me the courage to begin anew.

Jesus *touched* the lepers, Peter's mother-in-law when she had a high fever, the leader's daughter who was thought dead, and the blind men. He looked on the crowds *with compassion* as part of his healing ministry. (see Matthew 8).

Oh, Lord, continue to teach us how to act and love with compassion. Let us be ever mindful when we are treated with kindness and compassion, and remind us to be aware and thankful as we receive such actions from others. Amen

My grandmother, Dirlie we called her since that was my grandfather's nickname for her, was born in 1883 on a dirt farm near Paris, Texas. She was one of 9 children, 8 surviving as her twin sister died at age 2. I have a wonderful picture of her and her 4 sisters standing on a wood fence looking off into the distance – full of dreams? Looking for dad to come in from the field? Who knows? Dirlie is standing on the first cross pole, her mutton sleeve blouse tucked securely into her long gathered skirt, her sunbonnet on her head. I like to think she was looking with great anticipation to the future, for that is one of the many gifts she gave me.

Another is a memory of a trip to a family reunion with her surviving three brothers, one sister, and her mother Addie. Dirlie and my grandfather had bought a house in Sipe Springs, Texas in Comanche County for my great grandmother. Why Sipe (Seep) Springs, now officially declared a “ghost town” with a population of 15? I suppose because my grandmother, educated in a day when that was unusual, was principal of a school there while my grandfather went off to Tennessee to law school. But she took care of her mother.

First lesson:

Indeed, she took care of her bachelor brother, making sure that he had a place to do a little ranching so that he had a living.

Second lesson:

But the lasting lesson, the abiding memory that marked my soul at the early age of 8 is this:

We were preparing for the drive to Sipe Springs for a long summer weekend. I was irritated at the interruption of my aimless summer play. But nevertheless excited to be going on a road trip: diners, home cooked meals, and seeing my beloved Uncle Norman – the bachelor.

Dirlie prepared a big box full of gifts for each member of her family: useful things – a sweater, some kitchen things, a lovely trinket or two. Each bought with special attention to the recipient.

With the usual subtlety of an 8 year old, I blurted out, “Dirlie, why, when we go there, do we always take presents to THEM, but we don't get anything back FROM them. That's not fair.”

And she kindly looked at me and I can still hear her voice saying, “Because I was the one who left home and did well. And I have a choice and a responsibility to do something extra for them.”

So simple. And said so gently but firmly that the impact of it is still blazoned on my soul.

What is compassion? It is the simple acts of noticing others, discerning if possible what they need or seek, and without being asked, doing your best to provide it for them. Not everyone needs a sweater, kitchen things, or a trinket. But we all need for someone to notice us and to reach out to us.

Generous God, help me always to remember Dirlie. Amen.

When the church's daily morning office with its daily scripture readings, offers John 15:13, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for ones' friends". It is the story of a compassionate man:

"Wesley Autrey, a 50 year old construction worker was in the New York subway waiting for the local at 137th Street and Broadway in Upper Manhattan around 12:45 p.m. He was taking his two daughters, Syshe, 4, and Shuqui 6, home before heading to work. Nearby, a man collapsed, his body convulsing. Mr. Autrey and two women rushed to help. The man managed to get up, but then stumbled a few steps to the platform edge and fell to the tracks, between two rails.

The headlights of the No. 1 train appeared.

'I had to make a split decision,' Mr Autrey said.

So he made one and leapt.

Mr. Autrey lay down on the man, pressing him down, his heart pounding. The train's brakes screeched but it could not stop in time.

Five cars rolled overhead before the train stopped, passing just inches from Mr Autrey's head, smudging his blue knit cap with grease. Mr. Autrey heard the onlookers' screams. 'We're OK down here,' he yelled, 'but I've got two daughters up there. Let them know their father's OK'. He heard cries of wonder and applause.

Power was cut, and workers got them out. The man was taken to St. Luke's- Roosevelt Hospital Center. He had only bumps and bruises. He had suffered a seizure.

Mr. Autrey refused medical help because he said nothing was wrong. Then he dropped off his two young daughters before heading to his night shift. 'I don't feel like I did something spectacular; I just saw someone who needed help,' Mr. Autrey said. 'I just did what I felt was right'.

Every time I reread this, tucked in my Bible, I am in awe of the compassion of Wesley Autrey, and I recall an article I clipped from the New York Times.



I ask my ten year old to tell me about compassion:

“Well, Mom, it’s like a circle. And there is sorrow all around the circle, on the outside. Inside, in the center, is the person. And you feel empathy for him. And you want to do something to help him.”

I say:

“That’s a great answer. I like that. Now tell me what you think of this. There are some people who live on an Indian Reservation, and they are really cold. So some people at Saint Michael bought them a stove and collected coats for them. They drove to South Dakota in a van to bring the coats and visit them. Other people couldn’t make the trip, so they wrote checks. So, if I write a check, is that compassion? Is that good enough?”

“Well, that’s nice, Mom. But you really need to see the person.”

Jesus is all about seeing the person. He’s all about understanding. Even if he calls you a hypocrite, or likens you to a dog that doesn’t deserve table scraps, or waits a few days to show up and raise your loved one from the dead, he still understands you deeply. He sees what is hidden in you. He sees what you have hidden from yourself, and he responds to that.

I’m all about the external, about my concept of the person, rather than the person himself. You are Homeless or Hungry, Bitter or Broken. I cry for you, because I do not want to be you or to experience your pain. I am afraid of having nowhere to lay my head. I’m not a lily or a bird or a fox. So I write a check. I add it to my imaginary necklace of tiny checks that I wear like a chain of garlic to ward off the perils of reality.

When my son is really upset, I want to console him. I expect him to fall sobbing into my open arms so I can stroke his hair and pat his back, soothe him, make everything okay again. He turns a cold shoulder. He won’t speak, but I hear him thinking *leave me alone, don’t touch me*. This shatters my concept that I am a Good Mom. Now we are both Broken.

I try to think outside my notion of the right way to console, try to consider him as a person, a strange little person whom I want very badly to understand. It occurs to me, in a surprising flash that makes me laugh out loud, that I don’t want to be touched when I’m upset. I don’t even want to be seen. I want to be left alone, unencumbered by my concept of what I want you to think I am,

left alone to feel what I feel, to writhe and sob and spit bitterly into the cosmos, until I finally suffer enough to set it free. If you watch me, or touch me, I will tell you a lie about myself. I must suffer my foolishness in private, hidden and secret, to come to the truth.

How could I have missed this?

I could try to be like Jesus, to imitate him, but that externalization doesn't get me very far. I have to be *as* Jesus if I want to respond with a compassion that works every time. If you are cold and hungry and I give you a coat and some food, then you are warm and satisfied for now. But if I can understand you, because I have come to understand myself, then we can both be transformed forever.

Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am in trouble; my eye is consumed with sorrow, and also my throat and my belly.

Psalm 31:9

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...

Philippians 2:5

It is difficult to lift someone emotionally higher than where we are standing.

I am the mom of two kids who have serious health conditions. And I am a breast cancer survivor. My story of compassion is thick and layered. Before I was diagnosed with cancer, I would wholeheartedly define myself as someone who was compassionate and wanted to help others who needed it. I saw my mom be a giver her whole life. I was taught young to practice helping others. My sorority in college was rich with philanthropic endeavors. I joined the Junior League and volunteered to help with babies at a children's hospital. But if I'm going to be very honest and vulnerable here, truthfully, somewhere deep inside, I did not really like anyone to help ME, because in a remote corner of my heart, I didn't want to feel like I 'owed' someone something. Even small things, like a friend who offered to come pick me up from a rental car agency out by the airport. While nice, I dreaded these kinds of things, because then I instinctively felt like soon there would come a time where I 'needed' to return the favor. "I could always just take a cab home and then no one is hassled," I would think to myself.

The etymology of "compassion" is Latin, meaning "co-suffering."

Then came my breast cancer, right after my 40th birthday. While I was very very lucky and it was only a stage 1, I was instantly teleported to a new level of fear and uncertainty. I had a 5 yr old and a 1 yr old who was still eating baby food, and it was more than I could handle. I certainly had a caring husband and family, but my mom had passed and I was wondering how I would do this without her. Then, compassion at a level I had never experienced started to unfold. After the diagnosis, I was to have a very painful, specific kind of procedure that terrified me. The radiologist that had done my biopsy called me and told me she was scheduled to be off that day but would come in any way to do it for me because she knew how 'not fun' it was. I had bonded with her too, and she knew it. She sensed I needed her to do it without me ever saying a word. Her offering that seemed like one of the more special gifts a mere stranger a week ago would do for someone they barely knew. This is what I call 'unreturnable' compassion.

As well, a parishioner here at Saint Michael's, her name was Stephanie, called me one day. I do portraiture and she asked me if I could photograph her daughter [she liked the MDO pictures I had taken of her daughter I believe.] I explained to her what was going on and told her I was not taking any more business at the moment. About 4 days later, I received a phone call from a chef. Stephanie, unbeknownst to me, had hired a chef to cook me 5 meals of my choice. He wanted to know what I wanted. I was floored. Here was someone I had never even met, ever, who reached out to give me such an extraordinary gift, to ease my suffering. Stephanie, if you are reading this, you know who you are. Let this come full circle to know how much your 'meals' fed me, healed me, lifted me and nourished me, in so many other ways than nutritionally.

There is a great passage in a piece written by Rick Warren, stating, "I used to think that life was hills and valleys - you go through a dark time, then you go to the mountaintop, back and forth. I don't believe that anymore. Rather than life being hills and valleys, I believe that it's kind of like two rails on a railroad track, and at all times you have something good and something bad in your

life, back and forth.” This struck me so profoundly one day when I was walking before my mastectomy and I heard him read that piece. I remember feeling just so exactly like that, thinking, because of the compassion of people like these, because of God’s angels sent to help me, I was humbled and felt blessed WHILE feeling terrified and worried. There were simultaneous good and bad feelings going on. It was awful being diagnosed, but these and many other compassionate people were giving to alleviate my suffering. And it DID! Each word, each kind action, each card, gift, meal, note, email, each passing comment, they were all, each little action at a time, healing me even before I went into surgery. Compassion is healing.

I now have a distinct inability to witness suffering without action. It’s hard for me to bear deep in my core. My own son has just finished battling lymphoma. My daughter deals with Crohn’s disease which is not curable. She spent about 3 years in debilitating pain until she had a bowel resection in 2012. I have now learned that calling in the troops, all hands on deck, is the way to go. Now I OVER-ask for help. I want any and all assistance that we can get. And more profoundly, I have developed an impulse and drive to offer support for those that I can help with their burdens. It’s now not just something I should do, it’s primal, it’s innate, it’s instinct. I can’t sleep until I’ve sent that email with even one small morsel of encouragement and support. I truly want them to know I will co-suffer to alleviate even one small corner of their burden. I often tell those in my path, ‘call me, even if it’s 3 am.’ And I really truly mean it. I get it now.

One thing I have learned is that giving of yourself is not the same thing as compassion. My favorite storyteller of all time, Brene Brown says, “Until we can receive with an open heart, we’re never really giving with an open heart. When we attach judgment to receiving help, we knowingly or unknowingly attach judgment to giving help.” This has been my personal lesson on compassion. My life story taught me this. Brene also goes on to say, “Compassion is not a virtue -- it is a commitment. It’s not something we have or don’t have -- it’s something we choose to practice.” For many, after their lives are altered, there really is no choice. It just becomes part of the fabric of their DNA. But it’s still something one has to practice.

And as a side note here, I have a parting piece of advice, should you find yourself wanting to share compassion with someone in need. Do not ask, “If there’s anything I can do, let me know.” While I know that is what one offers not be intrusive or burdensome to one’s private time during a tragedy, but in the end it’s never going to come to fruition. The person or family is too overwhelmed to know what they might need and unless someone else steps up to coordinate care, they don’t have the time to even figure it out. A better approach is to just do something. Anything! Even just send a card. Just show compassion. Like “Stephanie” did for me, she just took action and had something sent. A friend of mine recently just brought over sacks of groceries: toilet paper, paper plates, a case of bottled water and snacks for the pantry. I never asked for it and never knew it was coming. But after being at the hospital for 9 days, we needed toilet paper and my daughter ate many of the snacks while at home alone. I didn’t know I needed it really. But she already had it covered and knew it would help. Just do something...ANYTHING, don’t wait for an assignment.

On July 15, 2012, I received a phone call that no mother should ever have to receive. My late husband, Louis, who passed away three days later, called to tell me our infant son, House, had died. From the moment of that phone call, my world shifted from a place of certainty and to some degree security to a place of chaos and disorder. There is no doubt in my mind that God led me through the following minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and still stands by me.

God is a God of Compassion, and I know this because unlike the trite sayings that one hears at funerals (“God only gives you what you can handle”), God does not give you what you can handle. He gives you Himself and His angels to hold you while you travel through the dark and stormy areas of this life on Earth. The ability to survive the very worst life has to offer comes directly from the people you allow to show you compassion. Being compassionate to others (and frankly, to yourself) during times of sorrow, heartache, loss, and horror is the gift God provides to us, as humans, so that we may be touched by His Grace in human form.

I have, personally, felt compassion from my church family here at Saint Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church. During the darkest days after my son and husband passed away, I spoke with so many people that I both knew well and hardly knew at all who reached out to me with genuine empathy and love to make sure that I knew I was loved. I am forever grateful to everyone for their compassionate outreach and the joy I found in those grand and small gestures.

The one very special gift of compassion that I received within hours of learning of my son’s death was to have my very precious friend and fellow church member, Hadley Galt, by my side during the initial days of my loss. She flew home from a family vacation, sacrificing special days with her husband and two daughters to be with me. She stayed by my side almost 24 hours a day during those first few harrowing days to make sure I ate, slept, took a shower, anything that was needed, including “body-blocking” for me when I was overwhelmed with people and situations. She would sit with me and tell me exactly what I needed to hear: “I love you. I am here for you. I will help you through this one step at a time, until you can stand on your own again.” Then, she would hug me.

I was only able to give the tiniest fraction of that compassion and love back to her when she became overwhelmed one evening with her own feeling of sorrow over our loss. It was a blessing and a privilege to say, “I love you. I am here for you. I will help you through this moment, until you can stand on your own again.” Then, I gave her a hug, and we laughed through our tears at the way we briefly traded places. That instant gave me the clarity to realize that I would stand on my own again one day because of her unselfish, unwavering, and beautiful compassion. Her gift is why I am able to look to the future with love, hope, and compassion for others and myself.

Hadley, I love you always. Your strength carried me when I had none of my own. You are one of my most compassionate angels on Earth. Thank you for sheltering me with your wings and letting me borrow them when mine were broken.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:1-3

This past October on our first mission trip to Cuba, I had one of the most transformative experiences in my life. First, a little background: there are 29 priests, 28 parishes and 43 missions on the island. The Diocese has a Cathedral with an active Bishop, a woman, **Rt. Rev. Griselda Delgado Del**. It has its own seminary for training priests in Matanzas. The average priest makes about \$1,500 per year. The annual budget for the Diocese is \$180,000, mostly by funds from the Episcopal Church of Canada.

Bishop Griselda asked us to assist the mission of San Barnabe (St. Barnabas) in Sancti Spiritus, a community of about 135,000. San Barnabe is a congregation of about 25 to 30 individuals who have met in one of the church members' homes weekly for the past 10 years. They have Eucharist when the priest from Cienfuegos, a town about 2 hours drive from Sancti Spiritus, can get there and when his 1980's Russian-made car works. Our goal is to help them purchase and renovate a structure that can give them a permanent home. In their culture you are not a valid organization unless you have a single-purpose building. Only recently have they been able to buy and sell property. On our first trip the church leaders proudly reported that they had saved \$70.00 toward the purchase of a building. The cost of most property that they have been looking at is \$40,000.

All of that leads to my transformative moment. When we arrived to repaint the room in the home where they were meeting, install a chandelier (to replace a single bulb) and install a fan, we were greeted by many members of the congregation. Even more impressive was that the Rector, Junco, was there dressed in shorts and ready to work with his hands. (Something that does not happen in many Latin American countries). Throughout our time there we were fed, serenaded and provided with tools and items we needed to be successful by the members of the congregation and neighbors. It was truly a community project. But the real surprise came at the end of our time. After spending the morning looking at prospective properties the members asked us to gather once again at the home in which they met. We were anxious to be on our way. We had a long drive to the city from which we were flying back to the USA. It was then that they asked us if they had shown us enough Christian hospitality? Had they been welcoming enough? **Had they served us as Christian brothers and sisters?!** In all the outreach work I have done I have never been asked that question before. Here we thought we were there to serve them, but they were actually serving us! They were not looking for help; they were looking for partners! They wanted a hand up, not a hand out! They told us that they had been praying for over a year for God to lead someone to them that they could serve and with whom they could be in relationship. We were the answer to their prayer. I have now experienced what it means to be surrounded by a "cloud of witnesses." May you have the same experience as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead. It truly does change everything and everyone.

Ever since our trip to Israel with St. Michael's in 2006, we have been involved as volunteers in an organization called Creativity for Peace. This organization brings Israelis and Palestinian teenage girls together: first in a camp near Santa Fe for three weeks each summer, and then five times a year the campers meet in Israel to cement this bond. CFP has given us so much more than we have ever given.

These girls have taught us about compassion, the hardest obtainable kind of compassion, compassion for the other, in this case, compassion for the enemy. When the girls meet each other, usually for the first time, they are anxious, fearful and often angry. Each girl is required to tell her personal story to the group, and each girl is required to listen, really listen without saying a word until the speaker is finished. For some, those words are intolerable and the emotions unbearable. Somehow, some way they work through these intense feelings, and they are able at the end of camp to call a girl from the other side a friend... maybe not a best friend, but a friend.

It is Sam's and my belief that these young girls, soon to be young women, will never be able to look at the other in the same way again. Little by little the feelings of hatred, of suspicion, and of ignorance have been transformed by their being able to listen to the other's story. After camp these young campers must go back to live in the unsettling world that they have come from: the West Bank, Gaza and Israel. They will be surrounded once again by fear, mistrust and sometimes danger. And yet, they agree to meet together again five times a year in Israel. Against all odds, the friendships are maintained. We have witnessed that compassion can transcend reality. We see it happen every year.

In 1989, I was serving on the Mayor's task force addressing homelessness in Dallas. Meetings often took place at the shelter sites for a more in-depth look at the hardship faced by this growing population. At one shelter, I often encountered Mr. Odie, who while homeless, worked during the day keeping the shelter clean and organized. Born with a pronounced spinal curvature, cleft lip, and bulging eye, to me, he was a character that Tennessee Williams could have created. Always clad in a red flannel shirt no matter the temperature, pleasantly humming a hymn, or flashing his gaping smile, he went happily about his work. While, I must sadly confess, I and others tended to focus on his deformities, he did not allow our human failings to deter the joy he found in life.

One morning I arrived for a crucial meeting with my three year old in tow. Not an ideal situation, but necessary to be in attendance. Armed with paper, colored pencils, crayons, and snacks, I seated him at a nearby table and said a silent prayer he would be able to patiently wait. Mr. Odie was busily working across the room. It was not long before I watched helplessly as my son made his way with paper and pencils in hand to where Mr. Odie was standing. I literally froze for fear of how he would react to the face we all had found difficulty looking into. Jack extended his small hand to shake and I went back to concentrating on the meeting. As time passed, they were deep in conversation and drawing. A little boy's giggles could be heard from across the room.

As I gathered up all of his gear to leave, Mr. Odie handed him a colored pencil drawing of a cardinal that was stunningly beautiful in life-like detail. As they said goodbye it was if they had been and would be friends forever.

At dinner that night with family and friends around the table, the conversation turned to outward appearances. We sat in stunned silence as our three year old patiently explained to us that God only cares about what it looks like in our heart not on the outside. If our heart is filled with pretty, kind thoughts then we are beautiful in God's heart. When asked how he knew this, he smiled as he said, "You know Mom, the man in the red flannel shirt."

Over the years, the red flannel shirt has represented many lessons in Compassion in our family and our daily lives. Those words of heartfelt wisdom shared with a three year old have resonated over time. The picture was framed and has always hung in a place of honor wherever Jack has called home. There have been others but none that meant as much. Mr. Odie died Jack's junior year in college. There were no dry eyes as Jack gave the reflection for the friend he cared so much about. The lessons offered over the years to the little boy have been well learned by the man he has become. What a blessing, that could have been so easily overlooked.

O Lord,

Open our eyes that we may see that your beauty comes from within. Humble our hearts that we may know that Compassion must be given in order to be received. Let our hearts be filled with patient kindness through your Holy Spirit. Amen

Is the name of Albert Schweitzer receding from our collective memory? One hopes not, for his remarkable life (1875–1965) exemplifies what true compassion is and means. He famously resolved to devote himself to preaching, music, and scholarship until he was thirty years old, and thereafter to serve the world’s needy in direct and practical ways. Accordingly, in 1905 he began the study of medicine, and after completing his medical degree spent most of the rest of his life in French Equatorial Africa, founding a hospital for the poor in Lambaréné, Gabon.

Comments about compassion occur throughout the writings and sermons of this Nobel laureate (he was awarded the Peace Prize in 1952). For him, compassion was not just one “virtue” among others but the very foundation of ethics. What he wrote about this is especially compelling because compassion so radically shaped his own life. Two sermons he preached in 1919 are typical of his views and personal commitment (see *Albert Schweitzer: Essential Writings*. Selected with an introduction by James Brabazon; Orbis Books, 2005, pp. 135-150). In the first, commenting on the commandment to love God and neighbor, he observed that “Jesus rules out behaving toward one another as strangers when he says, ‘Other people must mean as much to you as your own self. You must feel their welfare as your own direct concern.’” The following Sunday he developed this message by focusing on compassion, citing Romans 14:7, “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.” The following excerpts from this second sermon are representative of the whole.

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“The true heart is rational and the true reason has sensitivity. . . We are ethical if we abandon our stubbornness, if we surrender our strangeness toward other creatures and share in the life and the suffering that surround us. Only this quality makes us truly human. Only then do we possess an inalienable, continuously developing, and self-orienting ethic of our own. . . The great enemy of morality has always been indifference. . . Our inmost moral being perishes when we are too tired to share the life and experiences and sufferings of the creatures around us. . .

Compassion really involves you in suffering. Anyone who experiences the woes of this world within his heart can never again feel the surface happiness that human nature desires. . . But counter the fear that compassion will involve you in suffering with the realization that the sharing of sorrow expands your capacity to share joy as well. When you callously ignore the suffering of others, you lose the capacity to share their happiness too. And however little joy we may see in the world, the sharing of it, together with the good we ourselves create, produces the only happiness which makes life tolerable.”

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Prayer: Open my life, O God, to your compassionate Presence, that I may be a more compassionate person. Amen.

April 20 Easter Sunday

Bob Dannals

Acts 10:34-43 Psalm 118:1-2,14-24 Colossians 3:1-4 John 20:1-18

Today our Lenten odyssey ends. We have been walking the way of the cross during the past 46 days. The whole purpose of our fasting and praying is to bring us to a new realization of the joy and freedom of Easter.

Easter is the event of freedom. As the bells and alleluias ring out and persons are renewed in the waters of baptism, the church proclaims that Christ's resurrection has set us free from the powers of fear and sin and death. We join Mary in today's gospel in recognizing that our Lord is alive, and we're raised to new life with him. This freedom comes to her in the news that the tomb is empty, her compassionate friend is not dead, and he will reign forever. She and we learn in this event that love is more powerful than death.

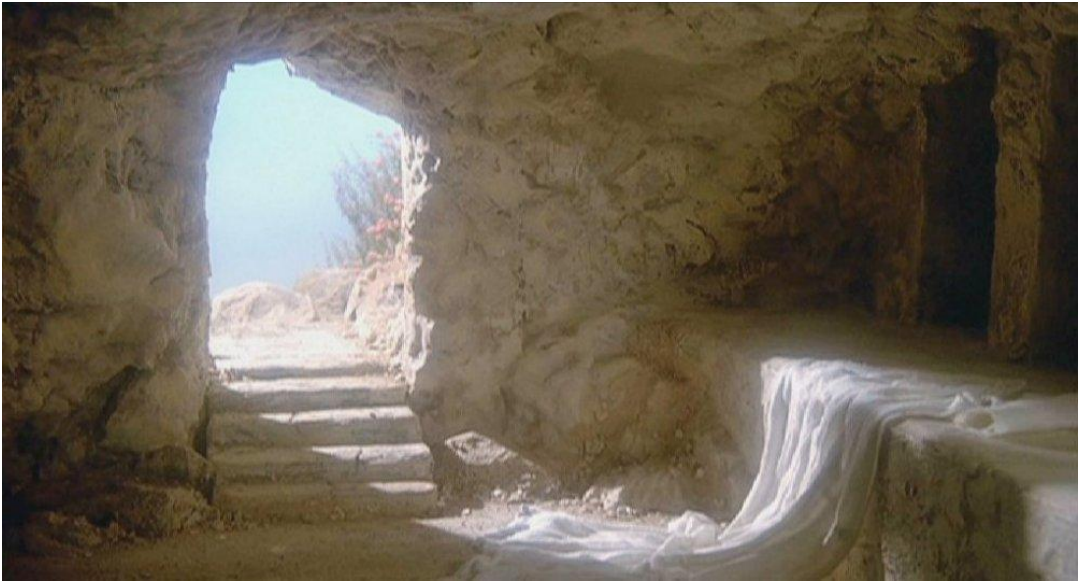
Late in his life, Albert Einstein recalled, "As a child I received instruction both in the Bible and the Talmud. I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the freeing figure of the Nazarene ... No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence and passion of Jesus. His personality, his compassion pulsates in every word. No ordinary myth is filled with such life."

We know that beginning with Mary, a few "saw" him in a way that, while we can't analyze physically, was real enough to propel them to propel others to create a community that changed the world. And we know by the testimony of others at our end of historical time -- Einstein was not alone in this -- that Jesus' presence and passion can still be felt.

The transformative power of Easter is that Christ has won the victory and we can rejoice in our freedom. The challenge of Easter is to make that freedom real in our lives and in the life of the world.

Christ is risen, sisters and brothers, and we are risen with him.

Alleluia!



He is Risen!

The Compassion Project

The Charter for Compassion was composed by representatives from all faiths and includes Karen Armstrong, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Tariz Ramadan, Sr. Joan Chittister, and Bishop John Chane

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 centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

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.

In Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life, author Karen Armstrong lists the steps toward this goal. She shares concrete methods to help us cultivate and expand our capacity for compassion, and provides a reading list to encourage us to “hear one another’s narratives.” Armstrong teaches us that becoming a compassionate human being is a lifelong project and a journey filled with rewards.

Learn About Compassion

- Look at Your Own World
- Compassion for Yourself
- Empathy
- Mindfulness
- Action
- How Little We Know
- How Should We Speak to One Another?
- Concern for Everybody
- Knowledge
- Recognition
- Love Your Enemies

Lent 2014

Saint Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church
Dallas, Texas