

Psalm 145

¹ **I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name for ever and ever.**

² Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name for ever and ever.

³ **Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable.**

⁴ One generation shall laud your works to another,
and shall declare your mighty acts.

⁵ **On the glorious splendour of your majesty,
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.**

⁶ The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed,
and I will declare your greatness.

⁷ **They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.**

⁸ The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

⁹ The LORD is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.

Matthew 14:13-21

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

In Psalm 145:9 we hear that the YHWH “has compassion over all that the Lord has made”. “Jesus had compassion for” the crowds” (Matt 14.14). “Compassion” seems to be a Divine trait. Both Divine compassion and the cultivating of a compassionate life are important biblical themes. So let’s get started.

As I began working with this topic I was curious about common understandings of compassion, so I asked a number of people. It is listening. It is presence. It means trying to understand. It entails tenderness. Compassion does not imply full understanding and yet a willingness to abide with. I think most of us know compassion when we have been shown it.

The word “compassion is a composite from two Latin phrases: “com” meaning “with”, and “passion” meaning “feeling”. To show compassion means to be with another person in an emotional space of feeling. Margert Guenther called this sentiment “Holy Listening” in her book on spiritual direction.¹ Compassion might lead to some action, like feeding 5,000, but it might also entail simply being a caring spirit in the presence of another. Compassion means you and we are not alone. Compassion means acceptance of a person but not necessarily acceptance of ideas or actions. Compassion seeks to better understand. This survey reflects the biblical roots of the words translated as “compassion” in our English bibles.

The Hebrew term for compassion (רַחֵם (racham)) is undoubtedly linked to the term used for “womb”.² I find this linguistic connection very moving and compelling. According to our creation stories, it is God who has birthed us into being; it is God who has breathed life into each of us; it is God who has gestated plants and animals into sustainable ecosystems. We are the by-product of God’s compassion, womb love, and the nourishing cord still links us. Psalm 103:13-14 beautifully describes this Hebrew understanding of God’s compassion: “As tenderly as parents treat their children, that’s how tenderly you treat your worshipers, YHWH. For you know what we are made of—you remember that we are nothing but dust” (Inclusive Bible translation).

As someone who came from a womb but has no womb, I still care deeply for those people and plants and institutions for which I have been given responsibility. If I have unintentionally caused harm or neglect to any of these (like accidentally cutting off a fruit bearing branch of my tomato plant while pruning), I am pained. I feel it in my gut. My tummy, probably near where the womb would be, becomes unsettled when those near suffer or are in danger. This is the reality for many men,

¹ Margert Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1992).

² *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, edited by Brown, Driver, and Briggs, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. 933.

not just me, and it is why this Hebrew word so full of feminine imagery is extended to fathers and men as well.³

New Testament authors, many of them Jews, were aware of the way in which compassion had been used within the Hebrew bible, and they were also informed by the Greek understandings of compassion (σπλάγχνα). The Greeks, like the Hebrews, located compassion in that area beneath our rib cage. They considered organs like the heart, lungs, intestines and bowels to be sources of higher wisdom, of greater understanding, of emotions like sympathy and empathy.⁴ These kinds of things, they decided, constitute compassion.

Jesus had had a bad week. At the end of Matthew 13 he was rejected by the home town folk in Nazareth. Then in early chapter 14 his friend, kinsman, fellow servant of God (John the Baptist) was beheaded. Jesus decided to withdraw “to a deserted place by himself”. But the crowds follow him. It is probably not what Jesus needed that day. He sees those seeking healing, those who were hungering, those also grieving the Baptist’s death, those overwhelmed with the Roman occupation. His higher wisdom, his emotions, his sympathy and empathy were activated. In short, he had compassion for those sheep without a shepherd. It makes me wonder about those things which elicit in us and our faith community “compassion”. This question takes me to the next stage of the sermon in which I will consider a few aspects of compassionate living.

Compassion for oneself: A wonderful quote on this topic comes from Dr. Kristin Neff. Self-compassion involves acting the same way towards ourselves as we might with a friend or child who is having a difficult time, who has failed, who finds themselves not liking themselves. She writes,

Instead of mercilessly judging and criticizing yourself for various inadequacies or shortcomings, self-compassion means you are kind and understanding when confronted with personal failings – after all, who ever said you were supposed to be perfect?

You may try to change in ways that allow you to be more healthy and happy, but this is done because you care about yourself, not because you are worthless or unacceptable as you are. Perhaps most importantly, having compassion for yourself means that you honor and accept your humanness. Things will not always go the way you want them to. You will encounter frustrations, losses will occur, you will make mistakes, bump up against your limitations, fall short of your ideals. This is the human condition, a reality shared by all of us. The more you open your heart to this reality instead of

³ For example, see the more literal translation of the beginning to Psalm 103:13—“As a father has compassion”.

⁴ *The Analytical Greek Lexicon*, edited by Harold Moulton (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1977), p. 373.

constantly fighting against it, the more you will be able to feel compassion for yourself and all your fellow humans in the experience of life.⁵

If you are interested in meditation practices which cultivate self compassion, they are present on the web site I reference in the posted hard-copy of this sermon. I devoted a fair bit of time to self-compassion in this sermon because I think this is a keystone for living a compassionate presence within our social circles.

Compassion Close to Home:

If I recognize the general stress which the COVID-19 pandemic has caused me I, theoretically, will be better equipped for faith-filled responses to others experiencing that same stress in their unique settings. It has pained me, for example, to not regularly see church people or shake their hands. How much more so for those confined to care homes or their beds or their apartments? While grief is not desired, it is teaching me the value of relationship and connection for me. This is my invitation to make a call or send a card.

Figuring out how to facilitate community, for example, with no people in worship or social gatherings has challenged and me. Figuring out how to safely re-engage worship for the congregation has frustrated me. The technological demands have nearly overwhelmed me. (And I don't even have dependents clamoring for my attention!) If I am experiencing these things, how much more so for those in the educational setting, business owners, medical personnel, or stay at home parents trying to safely reinvent their former work? Ideally, to recognize the stress with which all of us are living will enable me to be patient with myself as well as others. Sometimes the frustration boils over in un-helpful ways, and we are invited to be gentle with others and ourselves; we are invited to ask questions at the root of the grief which has bubbled forth.

These are just two illustrations of the ways in which self-compassion might be extended to those in our homes, those in our apartment complexes, those in our office spaces, and those in our congregation. This is an invitation to not only be tender with ourselves, but those closest to us. And hopefully it radiates out from there allowing us to offer a greater compassionate presence in our communities as well as the world.

Compassion in our Larger Communities: I am choosing to not separate out the local community from the global community. To this end I offer a reflection which I came across shortly after the World Trade Center Towers went up in flames

⁵Kristin Neff, "The Three Elements of Self-Compassion" (<https://self-compassion.org/the-three-elements-of-self-compassion-2/>).

that fateful September 11 day back in 2001. It is from Tich Nhat Hahn. This quote appears in a review of his book *Calming the Fearful Mind*.

So many words have spilled out through the media about the roots of terrorism and the best ways to handle this scourge that endangers all nations. Zen master and meditation teacher Thich Nhat Hanh offers a spiritual perspective that is both compassionate and illuminating. He was the one who in a statement issued to the *New York Times* on September 18, 2001, said: "The violence and hatred we presently face has been created by misunderstanding, injustice, discrimination, and despair. We are all co-responsible for the making of violence and despair in the world by our way of living, of consuming and of handling the problems of the world. Understanding why this violence has been created, we will then know what to do and what not to do in order to decrease the level of violence in ourselves and in the world, to create and foster understanding, reconciliation, and forgiveness."

When asked what he would do if given a face to face interview with Osama bin Laden, he said: "The first thing I would do is listen." This is the same kind of spiritual perspective demonstrated by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings which were designed to heal the wounds of apartheid. Forgiveness, compassion and an open heart are the best responses to terrorism — not hatred, anger, vengeance and violence.⁶

We are invited to do this in our local communities and our global community. So, we are invited to:

Know our neighbors. Look up when we are walking; Greet people; Sit on our front stoop; Buy from local merchants; Share what we have; Garden together; Support neighborhood schools; Talk to the mail carrier; Help carry something heavy; Hire young people for odd jobs; Organize a block party; Bake extra and share; Ask for help when we need it; Share our skills; Listen before we react to anger; Seek to understand; Learn from new and uncomfortable angles.⁷

When done with an open heart, these activities will foster compassion.

God has shown us compassion. Jesus has shown us compassion. May those of us who carry Christ's name grow in our ability to be compassionate people.

Amen.

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⁶ Book Review by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat of Thich Nhat Hahn's, *Calming the Anxious Mind: A Zen Response to Terrorism*; found at <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/reviews/view/10034>.

⁷ <https://www.northernsun.com/Build-Community-Poster-%284193%29.html>

Congregational Prayer

The joys and concerns for this week are listed on the password protected side our web-site. There have been some meaningful transitions this past week, so I would encourage those of the congregation to take a look. If you need assistance accessing this part of our website, please contact the church office.

Through the course of the congregational prayer I will at times offer the words: Lord, in your mercy. Your response will be: Here our prayer. We join together in prayer.

LORD, you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. You are good to all, and your compassion is over all that you have made. All creation gives witness to your handiwork. The river sustains fish and fowl alike. The berries sustain animals and humans alike. Your grace extends to those who are at home with you and those who finding their way back to you. For the gifts of creation, Christ and compassion we give you thanks O God. LORD, in your mercy. [hear our prayer].

We recognize the difficulties in our world and are keenly aware that your mercy and compassion are needed as much now as ever. We pray for those who are marginalized and stigmatized. We pray for refugees fleeing their homes to an unknown future. We pray for those called to maintain civil order. We pray for our leaders who make policy decisions affecting their citizens. LORD, in your mercy. [hear our prayer].

We recognize the challenges many of our homes and families face. Those in the educational system—children, parents, educational staff—wait in these days with concern. May you, O LORD, tend to anxious minds and hearts. Those facing health issues in their own lives, in the people of their lives, in the lives of their patients and clients wait in these days with concern. May you, O LORD, tend to anxious minds and hearts. Those whose future is uncertain—health, relational, economic—wait in these days with concern. May you, O LORD, tend to anxious minds and hearts. We hold before you all who suffer in body, mind, and spirit. LORD, in your mercy. [hear our prayer].

Finally, gracious God, we pray for our selves. You know our gifts and our weaknesses. You know what we need before we know it ourselves. You know our fears and hopes. May we come to feel the compassion you shower upon us and extend that compassion to ourselves, our homes, our communities, and our global community. LORD, in your mercy. [hear our prayer].

You hold us and all creation in the hollow of your hand and it is there we take refuge. Give us the trust and courage of Jesus who we seek to follow. To that end we pray together the prayer he taught his followers, saying: Our father / mother....