

Homily – Sharing our Compassion

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Today, I want to talk about the form of love we call compassion.

Compassion is defined as “a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering.” “Compassion literally means “to suffer together.” And notice that last part, there is a call to action, a call to alleviate or relieve the suffering.

Compassion is made up of multiple steps. “First, to have compassion for others you must notice that they are suffering. Second, compassion involves being moved by the suffering of others so that your heart responds to their pain. When this occurs you feel warmth, caring, and the desire to help the suffering person in some way. Having compassion also means that you offer understanding and kindness to others when they fail or make mistakes, rather than judging them harshly. Perhaps this is what we need to remember to do when someone comes down with the Coronavirus. Let’s not blame the victim. Finally, when you feel compassion for another, rather than mere pity, it means that you realize that suffering, failure and imperfection is part of the shared human experience.

Today’s Gospel reading is about compassion. The miracle of the fishes and loaves is the only story that is told in all four of the Gospels. In today’s version from Matthew, “Jesus saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them.” But, compassion is not what the Disciples felt. Instead, the Disciples felt annoyed or bothered. They suggested that Jesus send the crowd away. But “Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

Now, I certainly would feel overwhelmed at the thought of feeding five thousand people, so I can imagine how the Disciples would have felt. But, somehow the compassion of Jesus rubbed off on the Disciples which then rubbed off on many in the crowd. Somehow, through compassion, the crowd had enough food. The seemingly unsurmountable task is accomplished as Jesus calls out the generosity lying dormant in the crowd. The resources were there waiting to be called forth. In twenty-first century America we often think that competition is the engine that drives us to excel. But, throughout history and throughout the Bible, and today’s Gospel story, we see that collaboration is really the virtue that overcomes obstacles and performs miracles.

And, I don’t think it is new news to any of us that as followers of Jesus and as spiritual beings we are called to have compassion on those we encounter in life. So the

question that I pose today is how can we increase our capacity and sharing of compassion with others? How can we all unleash the generosity that lies dormant in each and every one of us?

Karen Armstrong is the author of the book, "Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life. Five years ago we studied this book in our Thursday night adult ed class. According to Karen Armstrong compassion is the basis for all of the world's great religions. Buddhist, Confucius, Hindu, Daoist, Moslem, Jewish and Christian traditions all have compassion at their foundation. Each of these traditions call those on a spiritual journey to see outside themselves, to recognize the plight of others, and to act upon the need of others.

Now I have a couple of personal observations about compassion.

First, compassion is very important in my own spiritual journey. My spirituality is deepened when I can have compassion on others and curiously my spirituality is also deepened when I receive compassion from others. I don't wall myself off. I allow others to give compassion to me, and that links us together in our spiritual journeys.

My second observation is that some of you here today have a greater capacity for compassion than I do. We are all in different places in our spiritual journeys, and we don't all have the same capacity. And, most of the time my goal is to become more like those that have more compassion. Most of the time I want to have more compassion.

Notice I said most of the time. And, I said that because there have been times in my life that I have had compassion fatigue.

"Compassion fatigue is a condition characterized by a gradual lessening of compassion over time. It is common among individuals that work directly with trauma victims such as nurses, psychologists, and first responders. Sufferers can exhibit several symptoms including hopelessness, a decrease in experiences of pleasure, constant stress and anxiety, sleeplessness or nightmares, and a pervasive negative attitude. This can have detrimental effects on individuals, both professionally and personally, including a decrease in productivity, the inability to focus, and the development of new feelings of incompetency and self-doubt." I think we can all imagine the compassion fatigue that must be experienced these days in the hospitals in Florida. Perhaps in these times we are all experiencing our own compassion fatigue.

Now, those who study journalism "argue that the media has caused widespread compassion fatigue in society by saturating newspapers and news shows with often

decontextualized images and stories of tragedy and suffering. This has caused the public to become cynical, or become resistant to helping people who are suffering.”

In my own life, I have certainly felt the effects of compassion fatigue after watching or listening to the news. How many of you find that you have to limit the amount of news that you watch?

And, in my experience there are a couple of things one can do to help alleviate or lessen compassion fatigue.

Stress reduction practices are often effective in preventing and treating compassion fatigue. Taking a break from work, participating in breathing exercises, exercising, and other recreational activities all help reduce the stress associated with compassion fatigue. In addition, establishing clear boundaries and accepting the fact that successful outcomes are not always achievable can limit the effects. Boundaries are a whole other long discussion that we could have. Boundaries are critical for managing compassion fatigue.

In addition there is social self-care. Social support can help one maintain a balance in ones worldview. Maintaining a diverse network of social support, from colleagues to pets, promotes a positive psychological state and can protect against compassion fatigue.

And finally, I think there are ways that we can each increase our capacity for compassion and thus decrease our compassion fatigue. In Karen Armstrong’s book she lays out twelve steps she suggests begin with “Learn About Compassion,” and close with “Love Your Enemies.” In between, she includes self-love, mindfulness, suffering, sympathetic joy, the limits of our knowledge of others, and “concern for everybody.” Karen Armstrong shares concrete methods to help us cultivate and expand our capacity for compassion. And, she provides a reading list to encourage us to “hear one another’s stories.” Armstrong teaches us that becoming a compassionate human being is a lifelong project and a journey filled with rewards.

Now, I hope that this short discourse on compassion has been helpful, but it will truly only be meaningful if you share compassion with others. Compassion is an act. Sometimes, we believe it is a way of thinking, but it is also an action. Compassion must be enacted. It must be shared. It must be done. Even in these times in which we are sheltered at home, we must share compassion with others. What are ways that you have found to safely give or receive compassion? In these times, the phone and the computer are two ways that we have been able to able to maintain relationships. We are all on a shared journey through uncharted territory. We all have a model in Jesus who is boundless in his compassion for others. In our spiritual

journeys we are to be the hands, and feet, and voice, and eyes of Jesus in the world. This next week may we each be intentional about sharing the compassion of Jesus with others.