

Compassion

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Niantic Community Church
October 15, 2023

Scripture: I Kings 3:16-28

With all the events that have transpired in the Middle East this last week, which prompted the cancellation of the Holy Land Pilgrimage, I was tempted to cast aside my intended topic of “Compassion” and offer an interpretation of what is going on, why it is happening, and what must be done to achieve a just and peaceful resolution to the situation. Then I realized two things:

(1) If you want to know about the conflict between King Hezekiah of Israel and the Assyrian Emperor Sennacherib in the 8th C BCE, then I’m your guy. But parsing conflicts in the Middle East today is a whole different ball of wax – or rat’s nest, as the case may be.

(2) While I’m not completely ignorant of the situation, there are people out there with a lot more expertise and are doing a much better job at analyzing the situation than I can. Two of these are Nicholas Kristof and David Brooks. Both have been offering their views this last week in the New York Times.¹

Frankly, the best assessment I ever heard about the Middle East was offered by my own pastoral mentor, Rev. Bruce Van Blair, over 20 years ago. Bruce predicted that the crisis would be ongoing because, according to Bruce, “no one is good enough, nor evil enough, to create a lasting solution.” So, some sort of middle ground between good and evil would be forged, and re-forged, and re-re-forged, never satisfying anyone and, in fact, making things worse as time went on.

Bruce was right. Now, my fear is that people are determining to become evil enough, to create permanent change. Only, the changes that will become more permanent won’t be good ones, but more deeply evil, and therefore dangerous ones. I’m no politician, but I am a theologian. The theologian in me wants to remind the politicians that trying to overcome evil with evil only leads to even greater evil. The greater the evil, the greater the good must be to overcome it. If this isn’t true, then the message of Jesus is a lie. Not that anyone seems to be consulting Jesus in this mess – including Christians.

In any case, I decided that my original choice of sermon topic, “Compassion,” actually gets to the heart of the issue of Israel/Palestine, even if I have little hope of it being much of a part of what transpires in the near-term.

¹ For two excellent articles by Nicholas Kristof, see, “Seeking a Moral Compass in Gaza’s War” <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/11/opinion/israel-gaza-hamas.html> and “What Does Destroying Gaza Solve?” <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/14/opinion/gaza-hamas-israel-war.html>. For David Brooks’s article, see “The Missed Chance for Peace” <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/12/opinion/israel-palestinians-gaza-peace.html>

Ironically, all three of the leading Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – teach that developing Compassion is one of the most important and life-bearing things that a living soul can do in this life.

The importance of Compassion isn't limited to the teachings of these three faiths, either. Last month, Nan Rigdon and I participated in a "21-Day Interfaith Compassion Challenge" where 750 people from 80 different countries studied what 21 different teach about Compassion. Each day, we read prompts from a different faith, participated in "Hands and Heart" exercises meant to develop Compassion from the perspective of that faith, and then wrote reflections for the group. We also responded to other people's reflections on the readings and exercises. Then, on Sundays after church, we participated on a Zoom call to hear speakers from different faiths talk about Compassion. We also participated in breakout-rooms where handfuls of us from around the world could talk to each other more personally about our experiences.

All told, participants posted over 3,000 pages of reflections, and posted another 800 pages of comments on these reflections. That's nearly 4,000 pages written on the subject of Compassion in 21 days! And the verdict from all that writing? Developing Compassion seems to be one of those ways that we become most fully human in this life. That's why Compassion is understood as a high virtue not only in the Abrahamic faiths, but all the world's major faiths.

With all this emphasis on Compassion, you'd think we'd be better at actually *practicing* it by now ...

What exactly is Compassion, anyway?

The word Compassion is a combination of two Latin words: *com* ("with") and *pati* ("to suffer"). Compassion is "to suffer with". That is, to experience someone else's suffering as if it were your own.

The archetypal story about Compassion in the Hebrew Scriptures is the story of King Solomon's surprising encounter with the two prostitutes who each claim to be the mother of a particular baby. When Solomon commands that a sword be brought forward to divide the child, giving each woman half, the woman who falsely claimed to be the child's mother affirmed Solomon's decision. "It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it." Yet the true mother, moved by a burning sense of compassion for her son, cried out, "Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him." In this way, Solomon knew who the true mother was.

In Hebrew, the word for "compassion" is *rachamim*. It is derived from the root *rechem*, which means "womb." In other words, to be compassionate is to be "wombish" – to experience an affinity for another human being that is so deep and visceral that it is like they are *a part of you*.

What would the struggles in the Israel/Palestine look like if all sides determined to act with Compassion toward one another? (Not just the Israelis and Palestinians, but Americans, Iranians, Egyptians, etc.) The fact that nearly a million of Gaza's 2 million residents are children

should bring the issue of Compassion (“wombishness”) front and center in this conflict. But will it?

Compassion is what underlies the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have done unto you.” If you experience the sufferings of others deep down, as viscerally as if they are your own, what person would you ever want to hurt – even if they have wronged you?

In her book, *Parable of the Sower*, the main character, Lauren Olamina, has a condition called *hyperempathy*. This condition makes her feel and share the pain – and pleasure – of other people. Lauren’s *hyperempathy* plays a significant role in the story, influencing her interactions with others and shaping her worldview. Needless to say, Lauren’s condition turns her into an absolute pacifist. If she hits someone on the head – and there are plenty of reasons to do so in the world she inhabits – or if she merely sees someone being hit on the head, her own head explodes in pain. So, Lauren’s condition makes her highly interested in non-violent forms of resistance to evil. It also makes her interested in other people’s well-being. If they experience pleasure, she does, too.

What would the world be like if we were all afflicted with *hyperempathy* in this way? How would we treat our coworkers, or spouses? How would we treat the homeless? How would we treat criminals if prison guards experience what the prisoners experience. What would our political system look like if Republicans and Democrats had *hyperempathy*, experiencing whatever they inflicted on their rivals for themselves – and experiencing the consequences that their decisions have on their constituents? Really, *hyperempathy* is a condition we would all have if Compassion were not a choice, but was hard-wired into the fabric of our being. What in our lives would not change for the better if we all had this level of Compassion wired into us?

Apparently, this question may not be as theoretical as it appears. Eventually, I believe *all* of us will experience both the joys and the sufferings that we have created for others.

Why do I believe this? My belief is influenced by the testimony of thousands of people who have reported having what is known as a Near Death Experience (NDE). An NDE is a profound event that some people experience when they die and are revived, or are extremely close to death.

NDEs used to be widely discounted in the scientific community as mere artifacts caused by lack of oxygen to the brain that trigger delusions. Yet, more and more, scientists are starting to acknowledge that these experiences may not only be real, but signify that human consciousness, while related to the brain, may not be generated by the brain. In light of NDE experiences, some scientists postulate that the brain is more like an antenna or radio receiver, tuning into consciousness that exists independent of the brain. Some even suspect that the brain acts as a *filter* of consciousness – filtering out the full spectrum of life around us that may potentially be accessible if the brain-filter is disengaged – as it is during an NDE.

In the last 50 years, scientists around the world have been compiling and comparing NDE stories from people of vastly different cultures, belief systems, and backgrounds. Many of these experiences have taken place in hospital settings where people were legally pronounced dead,

and in some cases have even been on brain monitors that registered zero brainwave activity, only to mysteriously recover and report having experiences that boggle the mind.

Recently, psychiatrist Dr. Bruce Greyson – who was an atheist 50 years ago when encountered a patient who had an NDE that allowed her to accurately report events that took place when she was in coma on death’s door – published a compilation of four decades of scientific research on NDEs. His book is called *After: A Doctor Explores What Near-Death Experiences Reveal About Life and Beyond* (St. Martin’s Essentials, 2021).

Dr. Greyson’s findings reflect the findings of many others with respect to NDEs. While the experiences people have can be amazingly varied and quite unusual, there are certain features that regularly occur – and occur regardless of a person’s prior belief system, background, or culture. These features include (a) a sense of oneness with the universe or God; (b) a sense of being loved far more deeply and powerfully than a person has ever experienced before; (c) a life review in which one not only sees, but re-experiences, the “good, the bad, and the ugly” from their lives – and often from multiple perspectives.

I want to focus on the life review aspect for a moment. One of the many stories in Greyson’s book is of a man named, Tom Sawyer – no relation to Huckleberry Finn! Mr. Sawyer had an NDE when the truck he was working on fell and crushed his chest. According to Mr. Sawyer, he had a life review in which he experienced all his misdeeds from the perspective of his victims. In one of them, he relived a memory of beating up someone with his fists. Says Mr. Sawyer:

“I saw myself at age nineteen, driving my hot rod pickup truck down Clinton Avenue. A man darted from behind a van and almost ran into my truck. It was summertime, the windows were rolled down, and I inched up toward him. I said to him rather sarcastically, ‘The next time you really ought to use the crosswalk,’ whereupon he yelled some four-letter words at me and reached through the window and slapped me across the face with an open hand.

“Well, I pulled the keys out of the ignition, stepped out of the truck, and I beat that man up, hitting him many times. He fell straight backwards, hitting his head on the street. I almost killed that man, but I wasn’t thinking about him. I was indignant. The guys from the gas station across the street came running over. I said, ‘Well, you guys saw him hit me first.’ And I very methodically got back into my truck and drove away.

“Now it’s life-review time! I can follow the adrenaline rush from the center of me outwardly, can feel the tingling sensation in my hands and experience the warmth of my face getting red. I can feel the rage that this jerk had violated my calm pursuit of happiness. I never knew that man either before we had the altercation or after. But in the life review I came to know that he was in a drunken state and that he was in a severe state of bereavement for his deceased wife. In the life review, I saw the stool in the bar where that man had his drinks. I saw the path that he took down the street for a block and a half before he darted from behind that vehicle into the path of my truck.

“I also experienced seeing Tom’s fist come directly into my face. And I felt the indignation, the rage, the embarrassment, the frustration, the physical pain. I felt my teeth going through my lower lip. In other

words, I was in that man's body, seeing through that man's eyes. And for the first time I saw what an enraged Tom not only looked like but felt like. I experienced the physical pain, the degradation, the embarrassment, the humiliation, and the helplessness in being knocked back like that.

"After I stepped out of the truck, I hit that man thirty-two times. I broke his nose and really made a mess of his face. He went straight back and hit the back of his head on the pavement. Okay, 'he hit me first.' Try that in your life review! I experienced all of that, right to the man's unconscious state. My life review included experiencing the event from an outsider's point of view, from a third-person viewpoint. This all happened simultaneously, seeing through my eyes and through his. During this life review I watched everything unconditionally. I wasn't judgmental or negative. I had the experience of observing something without any emotion or righteousness, or judgmental attachment.

"I wish that I could tell you how it really felt and what the life review is like, but I'll never be able to do it accurately. Will you be totally devastated by the crap you've brought into other people's lives? Or will you be equally enlightened and uplifted by the love and joy that you have shared in other people's lives? Well, guess what? It pretty much averages itself out. You will be responsible for yourself, judging and reliving what you have done to everything and everybody in very far-reaching ways." (pp. 181-183)

Mr. Sawyer's experience is one of the most common attributes of NDEs. Similar versions of his experience have been told by thousands. Happily, the review is nearly always experienced in a non-judgmental way, as if the reason for it is not condemnation, but learning.

Almost inevitably, what these people experience on the other side of their NDE is a determination to be more *compassionate* toward others. Why wouldn't they? If you knew the real effect of your actions toward others, would you not be more cognizant about the effects? And if you knew that someday you would actually experience their suffering – or joy – would you not do everything in your power to minimize the pain and maximize people's joy?

If you ask me, chances are about 100% that you will have such an experience one day. And chances are about 100% that this is why each and every one of the major world religions teaches us that it is vitally important to cultivate a compassionate identity in life. Because one day we will not have a *Near Death Experience*, but an *actual* death. And, after reviewing our life, we will be expected to apply the results of our learning in the Realm we inhabit. Perhaps we will all have Lauren Olamina's condition of *hyperempathy*, and how we treat others will determine whether we experience our ongoing life as heaven or hell.

When I see what is happening in Israel/Palestine today, I grieve for what kinds of suffering that people are inflicting on each other, and may inflict in the near future. And I grieve for the kind of life reviews that may await people when they pass on. And I wonder how people might alter their course if they knew they would eventually experience quite directly and personally all the pain they create in this life?

Such things are beyond my direct control. So, while they cause me to wonder, I spend a lot more of my time contemplating that which is in my control: my own actions. This morning I am reminding myself, as I try to do regularly, that God calls me not to change the world, but to be

the change that I seek in the world. And this means striving to be more “wombish” toward others; striving to act with greater and greater Compassion.