

In an old interview with the Dalai Lama, the topic of discussion moved to the issue of compassion. Central to many of the world's religious traditions, and certainly a major component of Buddhism. The Dalai Lama used an experience that he had to try and express the importance--as well as the challenge--of showing compassion. He met with a Tibetan monk who had been imprisoned by the Chinese government for a number of years. In the meeting, the Dalai Lama asked the monk what was the hardest part of his confinement. The monk responded immediately. "The hardest part," he said, "was that I feared that I would lose compassion for my captors."

Among all the possible difficulties the monk surely faced, this was his greatest challenge. Powerful. Humbling. Perhaps, even unsettling. It goes without saying that he surely would have every reason *not* to maintain compassion for those who imprisoned and mistreated him. Yet, his training and the heart of his tradition called him to not simply acquiesce to the base nature of his being--revenge, malice, retribution--but rather to move deeper into the very heart of it all: compassion. Easier said than done!

When we are faced with such a story, I suspect that we often return to the perennial question: What would we do? Surely, there are all sorts of justifications for what one could do and should do. I can imagine that compassion for those who may mistreat us does not immediately rise to the top of our "to do" list. Indeed, when we are confronted by such a story, do we ever find ourselves thinking, "Okay, that is all well and good, BUT. . ."? Are we ever guilty of acknowledging the importance of compassion as a concept, BUT advocating for limits when the offense is too great? Might we seek a little moral wiggle room, offer compassion most times, but acknowledge that we live in the *real* world where compassion doesn't always "work"?

The practice of the monk--in the face of real and painful and harsh treatment--exists as a guide for us. His concern about the possibility of losing compassion for those who mistreated him sets the bar quite high. Particularly, at this time when the roil of public discourse is so debased, it is easy to think tit for tat, or to keep score, or to point to the one who started the quarrel and assign blame. As we discussed on Sunday, tribalism is alive and well within our culture. However, in the midst of such consternation, how often do we reflect on whether or not we are about to lose compassion for those with whom we disagree?

The question is as timely as ever.

It's also timely, because we do such reflection regarding compassion as we observe the Feast Day of our patron saint, St. Francis. Francis was one who not only extended compassion to the human beings around him in and near Assisi. He also extended it to the natural world, the created order. It's rather astounding that Francis possessed the openness to Brother Sun and

Sister Moon and everything in between. Why, even in our own day of pet services and awareness of the interconnectedness that we share with creation, there are still many who scoff at such things. Indeed, I recently read a response to an essay about the importance of pet services. The respondent excessively ridiculed the whole affair, noting that animals were not sentient and, therefore, undeserving of such attention and care. So much for compassion. What we need are the likes of St. Francis, and the Buddhist monk, and the Dalai Lama, and all of us in our finer moments to engage the world with compassion.

Let us not confuse compassion with agreement on all matters. We, certainly, can and should disagree. We will not, however, lose sight of the humanity of the other. Indeed, let us confirm respect for the humanity of others as well as the divine hand in the whole of creation and its creatures. During the 1980's a Roman Catholic peace organization, Pax Christi, produced a powerful poster. Two individuals hugged. Above them the words were printed, "A modest proposal for peace: Let the Christians of the world agree that they will not kill each other." Powerful. Humbling. Certainly, unsettling. Yet, that is what God calls us to. The prayer of Francis that follows is of a piece that the Buddhist monk would understand. May we all live more fully into it.

Lord make me an instrument of your peace

Where there is hatred let me sow love

Where there is injury, pardon

Where there is doubt, faith

Where there is despair, hope

Where there is darkness, light

And where there is sadness, joy

O divine master grant that I may

not so much seek to be consoled as to console

to be understood as to understand

To be loved as to love

For it is in giving that we receive

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned

And it's in dying that we are born to eternal life

Amen