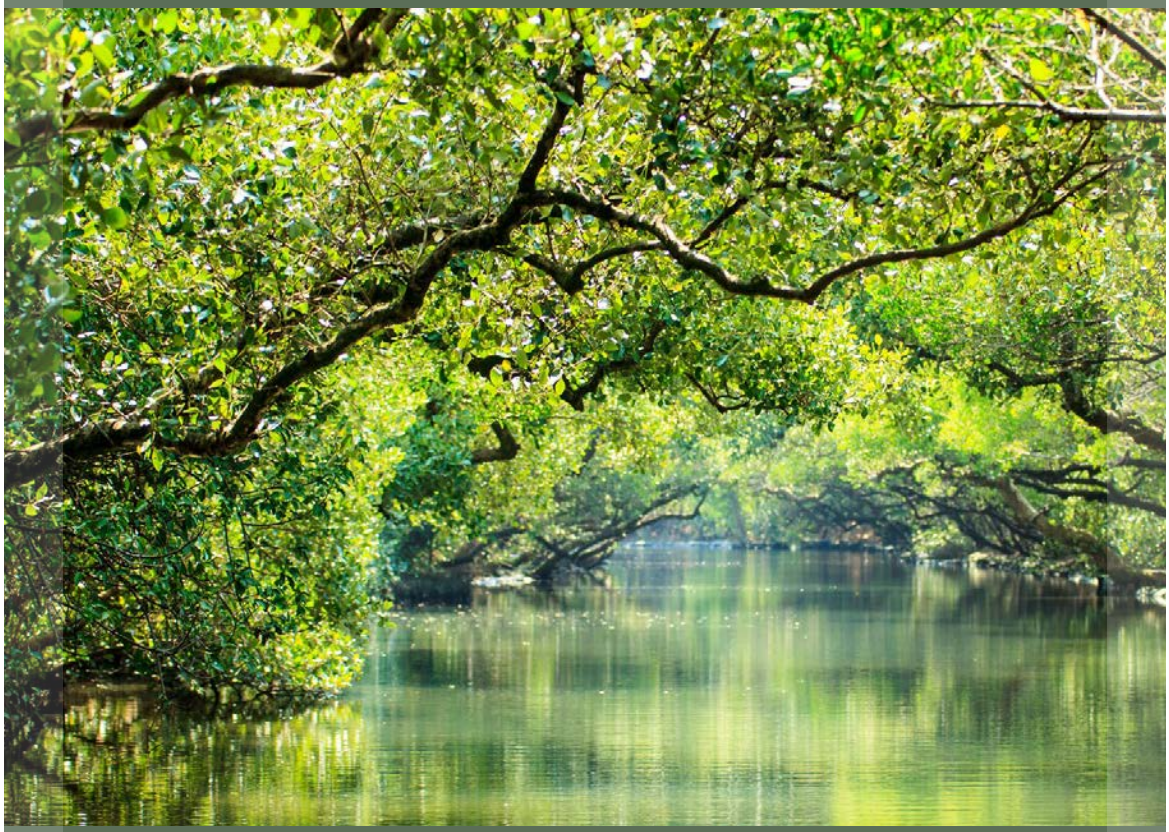
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Living Well Through Lent 2023



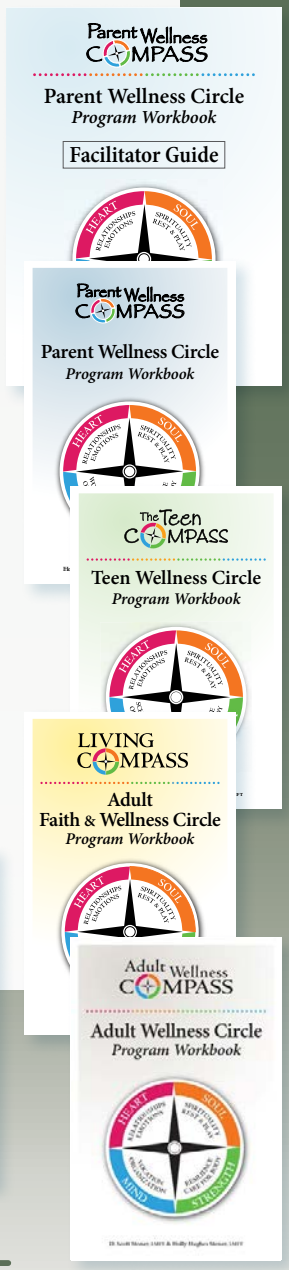
Practicing Compassion with All Your Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind

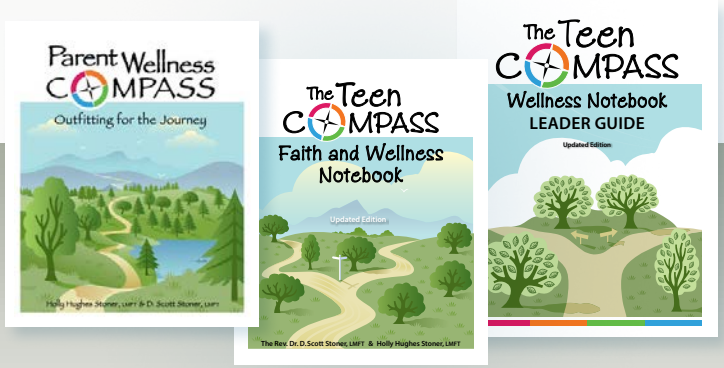
A Living Compass Seasonal Resource

The Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative

In addition to our Advent and Lent devotionals (in English and Spanish), Living Compass offers a number of resources (faith-based and secular) and trainings designed to outfit individuals, families, congregations, and organizations for the journey toward wellness and wholeness. Recognizing that we have a variety of resources that can be used in many creative ways, we offer several ways to learn about, experience, and to become more familiar with them.

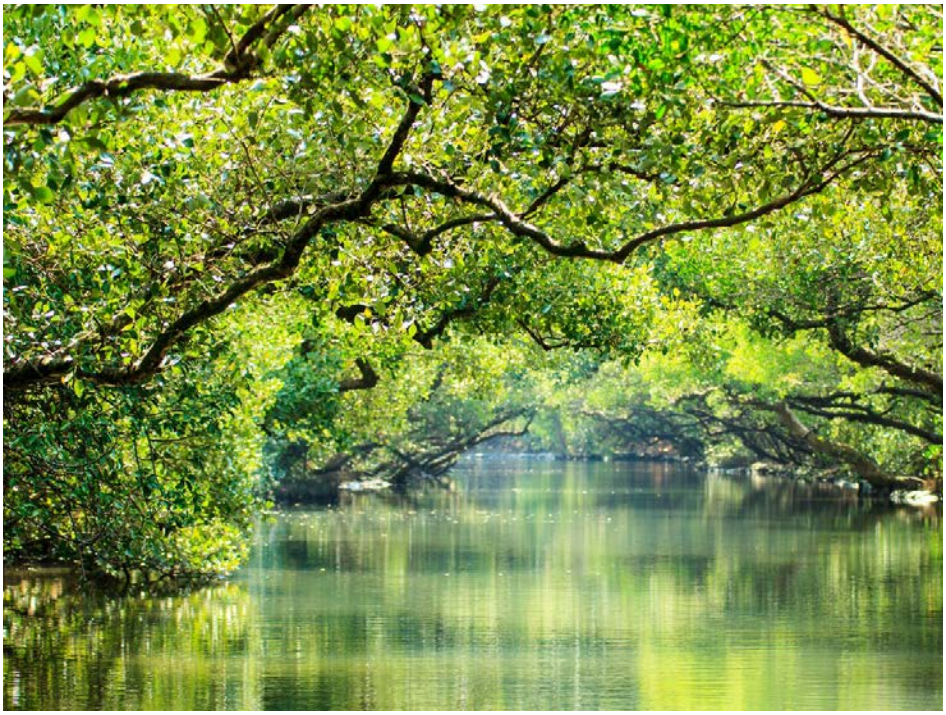
We invite you to visit our website: livingcompass.org. There you will find more detailed information about our resources, including books, workbooks, facilitator guides for many of our programs, Wellness Circles, Community Wellness Advocate Certificate Trainings, as well as individual training and consultation options. You can also sign up for the Living Compass newsletter, which is the best way to learn about upcoming trainings, highlighted resources, and other opportunities.





To learn more about our resources and our Community Wellness Advocate training, please contact our Program Director Carolyn Karl at Carolyn@LivingCompass.org.

Living Well Through Lent 2023



Practicing Compassion with All Your Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind

LIVING COMPASS

The Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative was created with a generous gift from Ab and Nancy Nicholas. While Ab passed away in 2016, their generous support continues to inspire us and make this resource possible.

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Editor: Robbin Brent
Cover design: Andrew Breitenberg
Proofreader: Holly Stoner
Compositor: Rick Soldin

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Publication Data

Stoner, Scott
Living well through lent 2023: practicing compassion with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind / Scott Stoner
p. cm.
ISBN Digital edition: 978-1-944146-39-9
1. Lent 2. Daily Reflections 3. Christian life 4. Spiritual
I. Title

Printed in the United States of America.

Cover Image: *The Sihcao Oe Green Tunnel State Park, Tainan, Taiwan*; Used by permission of shutterstock.com

- This devotional is available as:
  - an ebook at amazon.com
  - a free downloadable PDF on our website: livingcompass.org/Lent
- We also have a free downloadable Facilitator Guide on our website.
- Find us on the web: livingcompass.org
- Questions? Email us: info@livingcompass.org

LIVING COMPASS
Spirituality & Wellness Initiative
HEART • SOUL • STRENGTH • MIND

Contents

About the Writers 4

- The Rt. Rev. Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows
- Martha Johnson Bourlakas
- Robbin Brent
- The Rev. Laurie Brock
- The Rev. Jan Kwiatkowski, LMFT
- The Rev. Kyle Oliver, EdD
- The Rt. Rev. Dr. Jake Owensby
- The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner
- The Rev. Jana Troutman-Miller
- The Rev. Dr. Dawna Wall
- The Rev. Deborah Woolsey
- The Rev. Chris Yaw

The Living Compass: A Brief Overview 8

Introduction 10

The Revised Common L ectionary Readings for Lent 2023 11

Ways to Use Living Well Through Lent 2023 12

Ash Wednesday 13

The First Week in Lent 19

Theme: *Compassion and Faith* 21

The Second Week in Lent 27

Theme: *Compassion and Listening* 29

The Third Week in Lent 35

Theme: *Compassion and Prayer* 37

The Fourth Week in Lent 43

Theme: *Compassion and Mercy* 45

The Fifth Week in Lent 51

Theme: *Compassion and Well-Being* 53

Holy Week

Theme: *Compassion and Love* 61

Palm Sunday 59

Maundy Thursday 64

Good Friday 66

Holy Saturday 68

Easter Sunday 70

Scripture, Quotes, Prayers & Practices for Lent 73

About the Writers

The Rt. Rev. Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows has served as bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Indianapolis since 2017. The first black woman to lead an Episcopal diocese, Bishop Jennifer is a graduate of Smith College, Cornell University, and Church Divinity School of the Pacific. She has served congregations in the Dioceses of Central New York, Newark, and California, and prior to her election as bishop, was director of networking in the Diocese of Chicago. Her expertise includes historic preservation of religious buildings, stewardship and development, race and class reconciliation, and spiritual direction. Bishop Jennifer is an accomplished distance runner and triathlete, and a passionate chef and baker. She and her husband, Harrison Burrows, are parents to Timothy, who is 12.

Martha Johnson Bourlakas is a Mom, educator, author, and business owner. Her first book, a collection of essays, is *Lovefeast: Together at the Table.* Her second book, *Our One Word: Creating Spiritual Joy and Depth*, arose from a curriculum she wrote for women's spirituality groups within The Episcopal Church. Martha leads *Our One Word* workshops and retreats, and owns *Storied Goods*, based in Roanoke, Virginia. Martha and Mark are parents of three daughters, ages 28, 25, and 18.

Robbin Brent is the director of publications and resource development for Living Compass, a spiritual director, founder of Wisdom Way of Knowing, and the former director of the Center for Spiritual Resources in NC. Robbin is an experienced leader of spiritual retreats and programs, facilitates global gatherings of contemplative leaders, and is a graduate of Shalem Institute's *Transforming Community* and *Spiritual Guidance* programs. She loves spending time with her two sons, three grandchildren, and dog, Boone, hiking, and enjoying early morning coffee while communing with the wildlife that graces her backyard.

The Rev. Laurie Brock serves as the rector of St. Michael the Archangel Episcopal Church in Lexington, Kentucky. She has served churches in Louisiana and Alabama, and is also an attorney and crisis chaplain. Her most recent book is *God, Grace, and Horses* (Paraclete Press), a follow-up to *Horses Speak of God* (Paraclete Press). She is an avid equestrian. On her days off and most afternoons, she is at the barn riding and feeding treats to Nina, her American Saddlebred. Laurie also takes long walks exploring the beauty of nature with Evie, her rescue pup.

The Rev. Jan Kwiatkowski, LMFT, is a second-half-of-life wellness coach and licensed marriage and family therapist in private practice in Wisconsin. Jan and Dennis have been married for 44 years. Between the families of their four adult sons, they are blessed with nine grandchildren who are the absolute joys of their lives. Adventure with her nine grandchildren; leading, rebuilding, and dancing with the Milwaukee Dancing Grannies; Rope Flow; knitting; and sipping oat milk lattes with friends are sources of life and joy for Jan.

The Rev. Kyle Oliver, EdD, is an educational media producer and researcher. He serves as Head of Learning Media at Learning Forte, helping religious communities embrace hybrid ministry with confidence. His documentary podcast, *Becoming Tapestry*, explores questions of meaning, belonging, and the future of faith. Kyle also serves as Adjunct Instructor in Christian Education at Church Divinity School of the Pacific and Visiting Scholar in the Digital Futures Institute at Teachers College, Columbia University. He has served Episcopal congregations in Washington, New York, and San Francisco. Kyle, his wife, Kirstin, and their exuberant toddler, Fiona, recently returned to their Midwestern roots. They enjoy hiking, gardening, and other outdoor activities.

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Jake Owensby has served as the 4th Bishop of the Episcopal Church in Western Louisiana since 2012. Atlanta is Jake's hometown, and he is a graduate of Emory University and The School of Theology at Sewanee. The most recent of his six books are *Looking for God in Messy Places* and *A Resurrection Shaped Life*. He is currently working on a book about being a disciple in a messy world. Jake and his wife, Joy, live in the Kisatchie National Forest near Alexandria, Louisiana. They have three adult children, three grandchildren, a cat named Iggy, and a rescue pup called Gracie.

The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner—founder of the Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative—has served his community for 40 years as an Episcopal priest, retreat leader, licensed marriage and family therapist, and author. In addition to his coaching and psychotherapy work, he leads wellness retreats for organizations and leadership teams. Scott has been married to Holly Hughes Stoner for 45 years and together they are the co-creators of *The Teen Compass* and the *Parent Wellness Compass, and are co-hosts of the Wellness Compass Podcast*. In his free time, Scott loves cycling, running, and soccer, and spending time with family, especially with his two grandsons.

The Rev. Jana Troutman-Miller is a priest in the Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee where she serves as Director of Spiritual Care at Saint John's On The Lake, a retirement community in Milwaukee. Jana is a board certified chaplain and has served for 20 years in the areas of acute care, mental health and addictions, and long-term care. She holds a certificate in spiritual direction from the Haden Institute in Ontario, Canada, and is a member of their faculty specializing in areas of grief, death and dying, and stages of spiritual development.

The Rev. Dr. Dawna Wall is the Executive Director of Bethany House of Prayer in Arlington, Massachusetts. Dawna seeks to be a prayerful, engaged presence in conversation with God's mystics—ancient and contemporary. Passionate about facilitating intergenerational worship, programs, and conversations that help people embrace the mystery and hope of faith in variegated and affirming ways, she leads workshops, conferences, and retreats on spiritual direction, worship, congregational development, preaching, and inter-faith dialogue across North America. Dawna and her family enjoy reading, word games, walking, and daily adventures with their playful whippet, Pony.

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey has served as Rector of Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd in Athens, Ohio, since 2015. She also serves as the Convener for the Campus Ministry Collaborative in the Diocese of Southern Ohio. A graduate of Nashotah House Episcopal Seminary, after ordination, she served churches in both Wisconsin and Ohio. She also served as Program Coordinator and Coach for Living Compass. Deborah and her husband, Michael Luelloff, have enjoyed the many blessings and bounty of a beautifully blended family, including his daughter, Hailey, and dog, Jack, and her two cats. Her family enjoys spending time together outside and when they have to be inside, they enjoy science fiction: *Doctor Who*, *Star Wars*, and *Star Trek* are a few of their shared favorites.

The Rev. Chris Yaw is an Episcopal priest and founder of churchnext.tv, which produces online learning resources that shape disciples. A life-long Metro Detroiter, he is the rector of St. David's Episcopal Church in Southfield, Michigan, and is interested in exploring the interaction between online learning and face-to-face dialog to enhance the process of disciple-making. He is interested in helping congregations become more vital sources of knowledge and learning hubs for their communities. Chris is married to the sensational Kathryn and has three children.

The Living Compass: A Brief Overview

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind.
—Luke 10:27, Deuteronomy 6:5

The Living Compass Model for Well-Being offers us guidance in four dimensions of our being: heart, soul, strength, and mind. Just like a mobile or kinesthetic art, these dimensions are interconnected—movement in one area affects all the others. We are not compartmentalized people. Whatever impacts one area of our lives (positively or negatively) has an impact on the other areas. Each of the four quadrants focuses on two areas of well-being, and each of the eight areas helps to guide and equip us as we commit to being more intentional about the way we live our lives. The purpose of this Compass is to provide a dynamic resource that will assist us in our search for balance and wellness. Our call is to live an undivided life, where heart, soul, strength, and mind are integrated into both our *being* and our *doing*.

Areas of Wellness

Heart

- **Relationships.** The ability to create and maintain healthy, life-giving connections with others.
- **Handling Emotions.** The ability to process, express, and receive emotions in a healthy way.

Soul

- **Spirituality.** The ability to connect with a higher purpose in life and to have a clear set of beliefs, morals, and values that guides our actions.
- **Rest and Play.** The ability to balance work and play and to renew oneself.

Strength

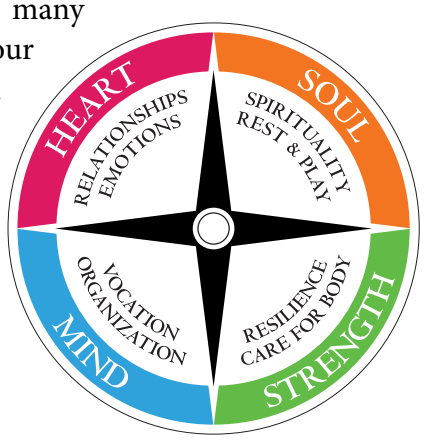
- **Resilience.** The ability to deal positively with the adversities of life.
- **Care for the Body.** The ability to build healthy habits and practices regarding our physical well-being, as well as the ability to end unhealthy ones.



Mind

- **Vocation.** The ability to align our life's purpose with the gifts and talents we've been given. This includes work, volunteer service, and any educational/enrichment pursuits.
- **Organization.** The ability to keep track of and make good use of possessions, money, and time.

Creating resources grounded in the integration of spirituality and wellness is what makes Living Compass different from other wellness programs. Living Compass believes we all have many compasses that compete to guide our lives, often outside of our awareness. When we intentionally choose the compass that guides decisions in all areas of our lives, we are better able to experience wellness and wholeness. It is worth noting that *health, healing, wholeness,* and *holy* all come from the same root word *hal* or *haelen*.



The Living Compass

Introduction

Lent is a time for introspection and self-reflection, a time to reflect on the core of what it means to live a Christian life in the midst of great change and uncertainty. When facing change and uncertainty, practicing compassion becomes more central to that life so that we are freer to both receive and share the healing love of God.

We are delighted that you have chosen to use our 2023 Lenten devotional to assist you on your own journey. And we are honored to have nine guest writers to help us reflect on this year's theme of *Practicing Compassion with All Your Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind.* Their diverse and rich voices encourage us to understand that in order to prepare for the new life of Easter, we need to be intentional about discerning what it truly means to practice compassion with our whole being.

As important as are the daily readings in this devotional, even more significant will be the reflections and insights that emerge in response to the readings. We encourage you to record them, either in the spaces provided, or in a separate journal. To help you to more deeply connect with what holds value and meaning at this time in your life, we have included spiritual prayer practices on pp. 80–82 that you can engage with if that appeals to you. When possible, join or start a group (both in person and virtual work well for this) where you can discuss your thoughts with others. Our Facilitator Guide provides additional guidance on how to use this devotional when hosting small-group reflection and conversation.

Additionally, we are offering an opportunity to have the reflections from this devotional emailed to you each day during Lent. You can sign up for these free daily emails on our website: LivingCompass.org/Lent.

It is an honor to walk with you on the journey through Lent toward Easter.



The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner

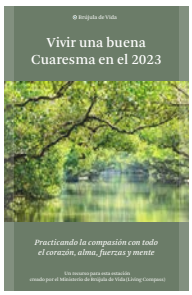
Director, Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Ministry Initiative

The Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Lent 2023

Lent Year A	First reading	Psalm	Second reading	Gospel
Ash Wednesday February 22, 2023	Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 OR Isaiah 58:1-12	Psalm 51:1-17	2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10	Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
First Sunday in Lent February 26, 2023	Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7	Psalm 32	Romans 5:12-19	Matthew 4:1-11
Second Sunday in Lent March 5, 2023	Genesis 12:1-4a	Psalm 121	Romans 4:1-5, 13-17	John 3:1-17 OR Matthew 17:1-9
Third Sunday in Lent March 12, 2023	Exodus 17:1-7	Psalm 95	Romans 5:1-11	John 4:5-42
Fourth Sunday in Lent March 19, 2023	1 Samuel 16:1-13	Psalm 23	Ephesians 5:8-14	John 9:1-41
Fifth Sunday in Lent March 26, 2023	Ezekiel 37:1-14	Psalm 130	Romans 8:6-11	John 11:1-45
Liturgy of the Palms April 2, 2023 Sixth Sunday in Lent		Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29	Matthew 21:1-11	

Holy Week Year A	First reading	Psalm	Second reading	Gospel
Monday of Holy Week April 3, 2023	Isaiah 42:1-9	Psalm 36:5-11	Hebrews 9:11-15	John 12:1-11
Tuesday of Holy Week April 4, 2023	Isaiah 49:1-7	Psalm 71:1-14	1 Corinthians 1:18-31	John 12:20-36
Wednesday of Holy Week April 5, 2023	Isaiah 50:4-9a	Psalm 70	Hebrews 12:1-3	John 13:21-32
Maundy Thursday April 6, 2023	Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14	Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19	1 Corinthians 11:23-26	John 13:1-17, 31b-35
Good Friday April 7, 2023	Isaiah 52:13-53:12	Psalm 22	Hebrews 10:16-25 OR Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9	John 18:1-19:42
Holy Saturday April 8, 2023	Job 14:1-14 OR Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24	Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16	1 Peter 4:1-8	Matthew 27:57-66 OR John 19:38-42
Resurrection of the Lord April 9, 2023 Easter Day	*Acts 10:34-43 OR Jeremiah 31:1-6	Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24	Colossians 3:1-4 OR Acts 10:34-43	John 20:1-18 OR Matthew 28:1-10

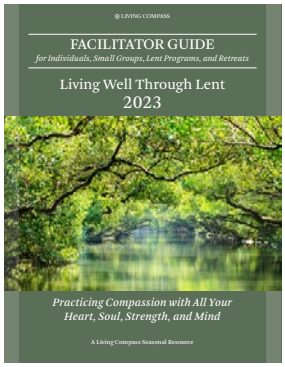
Living Compass has also published, *Vivir una buena Cuaresma en el 2023: Practicando la compasión con todo el corazón, alma, fuerzas y mente*—a Spanish Lenten daily devotional with completely original content. To learn more or to order, visit livingcompass.org/lent. Questions? Contact us: info@livingcompass.org.



Ways to Use
Living Well Through Lent 2023
A Personal Devotional and a Lenten Program

This devotional is intended to be used for daily personal reflection as we journey through Lent. We begin each Sunday with a reflection written by one of our guest writers. Every other day of the week begins with Scripture or a quote, followed by a reflection, and then "Making it Personal" questions, which offer an opportunity for you to reflect on the readings as they relate to your own life and spiritual journey. You might want to write down important thoughts, feelings, or insights, so we encourage you to purchase a journal to use as a companion to this devotional.

This resource can also be used as the basis for a church Lenten program, and we have created a free downloadable Facilitator Guide for group use, available on our website: LivingCompass.org/Lent.



The devotional is perfect as a resource for a half- or full-day Lenten retreat (more on this in the Lent Facilitator Guide). Giving each person a copy of this devotional (either printed or as a PDF, available for free on our website) would ensure that the experience of the retreat would stay with them throughout the remainder of Lent.

We are excited to offer the daily reflection by email too. You can sign up for these emails on our website: LivingCompass.org/Lent.

This Lenten season, however you use this devotional, our hope and prayer is that you feel supported in your desire to practice your faith in a way that is deeply renewing.

Ash Wednesday

February 22, 2023

Wrestling with Compassion

Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
—Psalm 51:11, Book of Common Prayer, p. 266

As a lover of fountain pens, pencils, and smooth paper beautifully bound, it is nearly impossible for me to pass a stationary store without going in. You know, just to look. Every new pen or journal is an opportunity to begin again, start over, and dream on paper. In the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, I packed up a brand new journal and my running gear to attend a running retreat that included a workshop on journaling. My running coach led the workshop and reminded me of the practice of ending each day by jotting down just a few things for which I was grateful. Gratitude journals have been around forever, but being reminded of the practice helped me avoid feeling stuck or frustrated with my running and—more importantly—with my life. Surely I could find something to be grateful for beyond thanking God for living to see another day.

The theme of this year's Living Compass Lenten Devotional is *Practicing Compassion with All Your Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*. It is just now occurring to me that I can't ever remember seeing a "compassion journal" on the shelves of the book and stationary stores I frequent. There are no "compassion journal workshops" offered with any frequency. As we live with the trauma of surviving a global pandemic and its cascading effects on mental health, healthcare, housing, employment, the supply chain, and the economy, not to mention the additional tragedies caused by climate change, natural disasters, and political divisions, many of us may be teetering on the edge of compassion fatigue—if we haven't already succumbed.

But Lent is a chance to wrestle with compassion once more. The 40 days that begin today give us the opportunity to reflect on the ways we participate in the suffering and brokenness of the world while holding ourselves and others with love and compassion as we seek healing. What if the journey with Jesus to the cross and tomb was an opportunity to dwell in the gaze of the one who looks upon us all with compassion and love? Imagine keeping a "compassion journal," noting the small and large gestures of compassion offered and received?

Like gratitude, it takes practice to be gentle and kind to oneself and others we meet each day. Practicing compassion need not be another "should" to inspire guilt, nor a pursuit that requires special equipment—not even pens and journals. Simply praying for the awareness of God's loving gaze that is cast upon the hurting and vulnerable, even and especially ourselves, is one way to begin. May you be blessed by this Lenten journey with our compassionate and loving God.

Thursday, February 23, 2023

A Companion Journal

Scott Stoner

Simply praying for the awareness of God's loving gaze that is cast upon the hurting and vulnerable, even and especially ourselves, is one way to begin.

—Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows

After Jennifer invited us to begin our Lenten journey with prayer, it seems appropriate to start today's reflection with a prayer.

> *Gracious and compassionate God, awaken our awareness to the abiding love you have for all people, especially for those suffering and most vulnerable. And with our hearts awakened, guide us to be your voices and hands of compassion in the world as we respond to the needs of those who are hurting.*

In the third week of this devotional, we will reflect more deeply on the connection between prayer and compassion. It is important to note that as people of faith, our compassion and love for others flow from our relationship with God. If our love and compassion for others are grounded only in our own strength and efforts, we will be inconsistent at best. When it is grounded in God's love and is an expression of that love flowing through us, our compassion will be deeper and sustained.

In the spirit of yesterday's Ash Wednesday reflection, we hope you will use this devotional as your own "compassion journal." One way to begin is by responding to the "Making it Personal" prompts that follow each day's reflection. You can use the spaces and blank pages provided to record your thoughts and feelings and wonderings about God's compassion and the compassion that God is calling you to offer, both to others and to yourself.

Making it Personal: Slowly pray the prayer offered above two or three times. What words or phrase speak to you in this prayer? What connection do you see between prayer and compassion? What do you think of the idea of using this devotional as a personal "compassion journal," a place where you can capture your thoughts during Lent?

Friday, February 24, 2023

Defining Compassion

Scott Stoner

The meaning of compassion is "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it."
—Merriam-Webster Dictionary

The focus of this devotional is *Practicing Compassion with All Your Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind.* Let's begin by taking a look at what we mean by the word *compassion*. Compassion is formed from *com*, which means *with*, and *passion*, which means *suffering.* So one understanding of compassion is that it means *to suffer with another.* We will also explore other ways of understanding compassion throughout Lent.

The Oxford English Dictionary's definition is similar: *The feeling or emotion, when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another, and by the desire to relieve it.* Both state that compassion combines a feeling of being moved by another's suffering with the desire to relieve that suffering.

We are taking time to define compassion because when we think of compassion, there are other words that are similar but not the same. In tomorrow's reflection we'll explore the differences between sympathy, empathy, and compassion, but today we'll consider the difference between kindness and compassion.

While closely related, compassion is a response to suffering, whereas kindness is not necessarily connected to suffering. Buying a birthday card for a friend is an act of kindness, but we wouldn't think of it as an act of compassion. However, visiting a friend in the hospital is an act of compassion. It is also a kind thing to do, but because the friend is suffering it is an expression of compassion. In these examples we see that a critical component of compassion is a feeling *combined* with a desire to respond to some experience of hurt or suffering. This understanding applies both to compassion toward others and ourselves.

Making it Personal: What stands out to you in the two definitions of compassion? Is there anything you would add to either of these definitions? Do you see a difference between kindness and compassion? Can you think of examples of both in your own life?

Saturday, February 25, 2023

Empathy, Sympathy & Compassion

Scott Stoner

Bear one another's burdens, and in this way
you will fulfil the law of Christ.
—Galatians 6:2

As we continue to gain a deeper understanding of compassion, today we will reflect on how it is both similar to and different from empathy and sympathy.

Empathy is the experience of feeling what another person is feeling. If a friend tells us their beloved pet has just died, and we know that feeling ourselves, we will empathize and feel that experience *with* them.

When we feel sympathy, while we are moved by a person's suffering, we are not experiencing emotional pain with them. We feel bad that they are suffering, but we aren't suffering with them. In the example of a friend whose pet died, if I had never experienced the loss of a beloved pet, I would likely feel sympathy *for* them in that I see their distress and express sorrow for their loss, but I am not joining with them emotionally in their loss.

We move into compassion when empathy or sympathy is joined by a desire to lessen the pain of another. For example, an empathic response might be, "My heart aches for you. I know what that's like. I am so sorry for your loss." This expression of empathy moves into compassion when it is joined by a wish to bring some relief to another's suffering. We might respond, "My heart aches for you. If you need anything, my door is always open, anytime of the day or night."

These are just some initial thoughts about compassion. We will continue to explore different ways we can both understand and practice compassion throughout Lent. Our hope is that we all be blessed in our desire to deepen the practice of compassion for both others and ourselves.

Making it Personal: How do you distinguish between empathy, sympathy, and compassion? Can you think of a time when you felt either empathy or sympathy that was joined with a desire to somehow lessen the suffering of another and were moved to respond in a compassionate way?

Notes/Reflections

The First Sunday in Lent

February 26, 2023

Making Space for Love

Laurie Brock

Jesus, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself.
—Philippians 2:5-7 (NRSVue)

My horse Nina is fed a mash of bran and oats and other good stuff once a week. It's different from her usual feed of oats, hay, and lush Kentucky grass. This mash is a weekly addition to her diet that helps her stay healthy.

Nina, of course, appreciates her mash … to a point. After she slurps up the warm, tasty slush, she leaves a residue in the bottom of her feed trough. As the days wear on, the residue dries to a hard crust that can build up in her feed trough.

Why Nina doesn't eat all the mash but instead chooses to leave some to accumulate is a mystery to me. I trust she knows what is mostly good for her and what she likes, so she leaves the rest, knowing that someone (usually me) will come and scrape the stuff from the bottom of her food bucket so there's no build up.

The people in our lives regularly feed us all sorts of things too, such as positive and negative emotions, desires, expectations, hurts, disappointments, companionship, all manner of stuff—some good, some not so good—that gets put in the bowls of our selves and souls. Hopefully, we let what's nourishing feed us, sustain us, and help us.

But what do we do with the stuff that isn't helpful, useful, or nourishing? What do we do with the gnawing anger, the grudges, the shame, and the other feelings that accumulate and take up room in our souls? Too often, we let the unhelpful stuff accumulate in the containers of our selves and souls, building up so that eventually there is precious little room left to hold the things Jesus shares with us so that we, in turn, can share with others.

Lent is a holy reminder that we all need to take time to scrape out the muck, the slurry, the stuff that either was never helpful, or perhaps once was but now no longer nourishes our hearts, minds, bodies, and souls. Lent is a focused season of prayer, of study, of contemplation, of worship, the perfect season for allowing Jesus to help us with the process of clearing out the stuff from our souls that is obscuring our love for God, each other, and for ourselves.

I imagine that when Jesus reaches into the space that is my soul, that is our human souls, he finds them quite packed with stuff. So much stuff, in fact, that the space we need to allow compassion to live and breathe is congested. So Jesus starts scraping, which is not always painless, but almost always necessary, in order to help us create space for the good stuff, for love.

Compassion is also one of those good things. Compassion means we have room to be with others in their suffering, in their sorrow, in the moments of bittersweet sadness. We need space to be companions to others in their times of need, but we cannot do that when our souls are too crowded with a slurry of sin, however that sin has settled in our souls.

This Lent, once we have been deeply nourished and spacious room has been created by the compassionate care and love of Jesus, may we be filled with the goodness of God's love. And out of this love, may we freely share that healing love with those we meet along the way.

Monday, February 27, 2023

Compassion and Faith

Scott Stoner

The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.
—Psalm 116:5 (NIV)

Beginning today and continuing each Monday in Lent, we will introduce a theme for the week that provides a specific focus on one aspect of our overall theme of *Practicing Compassion*. This week we will focus on *Compassion and Faith.* Compassion is at the very heart of God and, therefore, of our faith. As the portion of Psalm 116 above tells us, God is gracious, righteous, and full of compassion toward all life. As people of faith, we also aspire to be people who are gracious and righteous and full of compassion toward all.

In yesterday's reflection, as part of observing Lent, Laurie Brock invited us to fill our souls with the "nourishment of God's healing love." This gets to the heart of why we are focusing this week on the connection between compassion and faith. Our capacity to offer compassion to others is directly related to our ability to open ourselves to receiving God's compassion for ourselves.

In the First Letter of John, the writer says that "God is love," and goes on to say, "We love because God first loved us" (1 John 4:16,19). Rooted in God's love and compassion, our compassion is a fruit of our faith. When we regularly fill our cups with the living water of God's love, we are more likely to have the ability and the desire to offer that living water to others.

Making it Personal: What initial thoughts do you have about the link between faith and compassion? Do you see a connection between your relationship with God and how you're feeling or how you have felt compassion toward others? How do the two Scripture passages in this reflection speak to you right now?

Tuesday, February 28, 2023

Scraping Out Our Buckets

Scott Stoner

I imagine that when Jesus reaches into the space that is my soul, that is our human souls, he finds them quite packed with stuff. … So Jesus starts scraping, which is not always painless, but almost always necessary, in order to help us create space for the good stuff, for love.

—Laurie Brock

The quote above, from Laurie Brock's Sunday reflection, reminds me of a story. A man goes to see a wise spiritual teacher. After listening to the man talk about himself at great length, the teacher realizes that she will need to get his attention before she can teach him anything because he is so preoccupied with himself. So she offers the man a cup of tea, which he gladly accepts. She begins pouring and as the tea approaches the top of the cup, instead of stopping, she continues until it spills over the top and onto the man's lap.

The man, upset, asks her why she did that. She responds kindly, "I wanted you to see that you are like this cup of tea. You are so full to overflowing with your own concerns that there is no room for any teachings from God or others to enter at this point." The man paused, bowed his head, and thanked her for the memorable lesson.

Lent is a time to examine the thoughts, habits, and actions in our lives that are blocking us from being open to God. These could include any of the following: anger, impatience, busyness, distractedness, judgment, self-righteousness, envy, greed, self-centeredness, or indifference. Becoming aware of these is the first step in allowing Jesus to, as Laurie wrote, scrape out "the stuff from our souls that is obscuring our love for God" so that we can make room to better receive once again the compassionate love of God.

Making it Personal: What is your response to the quote from Laurie Brock? The reflection lists many things that can distance or block us from God's healing love. Did anything listed resonate with you?

Wednesday, March 1, 2023

Grammar of Faith

Robbin Brent

The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God,
slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.
—Exodus 34:6 (NIV)

Engaging with the theme of compassion has transformed my understanding and awareness of God's great love and hope for us. That God is always turned toward us and always ready to respond because of God's ever-present, unconditional, healing love.

The passage above from Exodus contain the first self-describing words God uses in the Bible. And these same words are repeated many hundreds of times throughout the Old and New Testaments. I was surprised to learn that at their root (Hebrew and Greek), these words—compassion, mercy, faithfulness, lovingkindness, goodness, forgiveness, healing, trust, and womb—all come from the same origins. The connection between some of the essential vocabulary of our faith allows us to get a sense of the awe-inspiring relational dynamism of God's participation at every step of the way on our journey of faith.

These words are meant to be understood collectively, as strands of a wholistic, unitive relational web, much like the web of a spider. These silk weavers spin webs that are strong (some stronger than steel), life-giving, and resilient, as each strand of the web is created for a specific purpose. They spin strands to wrap the eggs of their unborn. They spin strands to anchor themselves so if they fall, they don't fall too far. These sensitive strands sustain them by alerting them through vibration to the presence of food. The silk is their source of nourishment, protection, growth, and flourishing, just as the compassionate web of God—created out of an infinite array of strands—holds, nourishes, protects, and sustains all of creation.

Making it Personal: Do the connections between the words mentioned above expand or deepen your understanding of God's loving compassionate presence in the world? Describe in what ways. Are there other words you would add?

Thursday, March 2, 2023

God of Compassion and Healing

Scott Stoner

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

—Isaiah 49:13

There is a common misunderstanding about compassion and God that many of us, myself included, were taught at one point. This is the idea that the God of the Old Testament is angry, even vengeful, and that the God of the New Testament is a God of love and compassion. Like many simplistic dichotomies, this is neither true nor helpful. For example, see the passage above from the Old Testament book of Isaiah.

The idea of being afraid of God's wrath is not just something attributed to the Old Testament. I also find that many people have a fear-based image of God that often includes a fear that God will punish them for something they have done. As a priest, when a person is experiencing suffering or misfortune, I often hear some version of the question, "I wonder what I did to deserve this?"

I do not believe that the God of compassion we worship and follow ever intentionally harms people. At the same time, God does not save us from the natural consequences of our choices. While God is never the cause of our suffering, God is always moved to join us in our hurt and to be a part of our healing if we are open to that. No matter the source of our suffering, I believe God always responds with love and compassion.

Making it Personal: Are you aware of any fearful thoughts you have of God, perhaps thinking of God as vengeful? What do you think of the idea that God is never the cause of our suffering but is always with us in that suffering and is always a part of our healing?

Friday, March 3, 2023

From Belief to Faith

Robbin Brent

Faith is taking the first step even when
you can't see the whole stairway.
—The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

During his service in the military, my youngest son was part of two airborne divisions, which meant he often was required to jump out of aircraft and descend at a very quick clip in order to avoid being detected. The army has a formula for how many feet per second a soldier can drop and still land (mostly) intact. It is very fast. In order to do this, he first had to believe that his parachute would keep him safe, and then he had to place his faith in it by jumping. This is one of the distinctions between belief and faith. I might believe that parachutes work, but would not put my faith in one by jumping out of an airplane. He believed and then acted out of his belief. That is faith.

Both faith and compassion are used together many hundreds of times throughout Scripture to describe great love, deeply felt and then expressed through acts of steadfast lovingkindness, mercy, goodness, and faithfulness. As Dr. King expressed so well in the quote above, while we often have no idea of the ways in which our compassion matters, we are called to have faith that we are the visible heart and arms of God at work in the world. We make a commitment to act on our belief in a God of love, trusting that even when we don't, God knows where we are going.

It is our faith in God, expressed through our willingness to act on what we believe, that prepares our minds and hearts to respond compassionately to suffering, our own, others, and the world's.

Making it Personal: How do you experience the relationship between your beliefs, your faith, and your ability to respond compassionately? Jesus is just one example from Scripture of someone who remained true to his beliefs by living a life of faithfulness and compassion. Can you think of others? How might they inspire your own journey of faith?

Saturday, March 4, 2023

The Willingness to Give and to Receive

Jan Kwiatkowski

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

—Romans 8:38-39

Assuring those facing the end of life that nothing could separate them from God's love was part of many conversations I frequently had with the dying. These conversations were especially powerful with those who were seeking forgiveness and relief for the guilt and shame they had been carrying for many years.

Many I tended to in hospice were terrified to die because they had accepted and internalized either what they had told themselves, or what was told to them by significant others. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, they, or others, had pointed toward misdeeds in order to prove they were inherently flawed and unworthy of God's compassionate love. Judgmental words perhaps intended as correction became barriers not only to their ability to experience God's compassion, but also to the compassion they were withholding from themselves. What I've found essential to remind those for whom I have cared was beautifully expressed by Scott Stoner last Monday: "Our capacity to offer compassion to others is directly related to our ability to open ourselves to receiving God's compassion for ourselves."

As we close this first week in Lent where we focused on the relationship between our faith and compassion, I invite us to reflect on how our faith supports our willingness to receive God's compassion, as well as our willingness to extend compassion to ourselves. When we are willing to receive the gift of compassion, we have a gift we can then offer to others.

Making it Personal: What, if anything, might be a barrier to your willingness to accept compassion, from God, others, or yourself? Having reflected on faith and compassion this week, how has your understanding of your faith and your willingness to both receive and to offer compassion changed or deepened?

The Second Sunday in Lent

March 5, 2023

Connected to the Source

Jake Owensby

What we are asked to do is to love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy.
—Thomas Merton

They didn't have to take us in. Strictly speaking, it was risky. Mom and I were strangers to them. Nothing more than distant friends of a distant friend. B- and his wife R- were retired. Pushing their mid-seventies.

Our options were slim. We would either sleep under their roof or huddle in our battered car. So the old couple invited us to stay the night.

Their house was small and worn by time and weather. Mom got the spare room. I slept on a cot in the dining room. This was home for about a month.

Our hosts fed us and helped my mother get a job. Eventually, they found us a temporary, rent-free place of our own until we could get back on our feet.

I was eleven years old.

At the time, all I could feel was shame. Being poor and homeless is tough on the soul. It gnawed away at my sense of self-worth and dignity.

I cannot describe the transformative effect of having two strangers welcome me into their home and invite me to call them Aunt and Uncle. But I can tell you what that power is called. It's called compassion. And I believe that I know where that power comes from.

Jesus once said that you have to be born from above to see the kingdom of heaven. Jesus was saying that we can live a God-connected life. Later in John's Gospel Jesus promised that, after his resurrection and ascension, he would send the Holy Spirit to dwell in us. The very presence of God within us can be our primary motiving force and our navigational principle.

God is love. So the Spirit counsels us, guides us toward compassion in all the complex and varied circumstances of our lives. It's as if Jesus is our mentor in what love looks like in the different situations we find ourselves.

When we share any act of compassion, we might change another person's life. B- and R- certainly did that for me. But it's also true that we change the world in ways that we cannot see from our limited perspective.

It all comes down to the source of compassion. Our acts of love arise from God's infinite love, whether we realize it or not. Your actions may seem small and even insignificant to you. But God is weaving together all our desires and small sacrifices and kindnesses and moments of tenderness. And through them God is mending the world.

Monday, March 6, 2023

Compassion and Listening

Scott Stoner

God is love. So the Spirit counsels us, guides us toward compassion in all the complex and varied circumstances of our lives.
—Jake Owensby

For this week's theme, we will explore how our capacity to be compassionate is deeply connected with our ability to listen. We begin with the premise that compassion always starts with listening. In fact, a compassionate response is not possible without first listening.

The reflection for February 24 introduced this definition of compassion: "Compassion is sympathetic consciousness of others' distress *together* with a desire to alleviate it." To become conscious of another person's distress, we must be willing to first deeply listen to them, attempting to understand what they are experiencing.

If we don't first make an effort to deeply hear another person's struggle, our response will often fall short of being compassionate and may not be at all comforting to the other person. Imagine, for example, that a friend is telling me they were just down-sized out of a job they loved and had been doing for a long time. They describe how upset they are and wonder if they will ever be able to find a job they love as much. If I am only half paying attention and not really taking in what this all means to them, I might offer a less-than-helpful response, such as, "Don't worry, I'm sure you will find another job soon, given how strong the job market is right now."

In this example, my response is not compassionate because I do not truly listen to nor honor the depth of grief my friend is expressing. In fact, rather than offering relief for my friend's suffering, I might instead be adding to it as now they also feel unheard and alone.

Making it Personal: What are your initial thoughts about the connection between compassion and listening? Can you think of a time when someone shared their pain with you and you only half-listened? If so, did that affect your ability to respond with compassion?

Tuesday, March 7, 2023

Compassionate Listening

Scott Stoner

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

—Maya Angelou

We all have had the experience of someone pretending to listen to us but whose mind is obviously elsewhere. A common example is when we are at a group gathering, and the person we are talking with is busy looking over our shoulder for whomever they want to talk to next. Or when we respond honestly when someone asks us how we are doing and they quickly change the subject because they don't actually want to hear what might be unsettling to them. Neither of these experiences, as you might imagine, helps to make the speaker feel valued and connected.

On the other hand, most of us have likely had the experience of sharing something painful and having someone offer us the gift of their full attention, of being truly present to us. In those moments, the gift of their compassionate listening makes us feel valued and connected.

All of us know someone who could benefit from the gift of our deep listening to them right now. Perhaps they are going through a difficult time or are feeling alone. Maybe they are going through a big life transition and are feeling unsure. Perhaps they are excited about something, but nervous at the same time. As we focus this week on listening and compassion, I wonder how things might change if each of us could reach out to someone we know who could benefit from our listening and compassion.

When we offer the gift of compassionate listening to others, to paraphrase Maya Angelou, they may not remember anything we say or do, but they will always remember how they felt deeply seen, heard, and cared for.

Making it Personal: Can you think of a time when you felt someone's compassion simply because they deeply listened to you? How did that make you feel? To whom might you offer the gift of being fully attentive and compassionately listening today?

Wednesday, March 8, 2023

Listening beneath the Surface

Robbin Brent

Today, and all the days of my life, grant me the strength to examine my heart. May I be faithful, God, to your gift of truth in me.

—Beverly Lanzetta

As we practice compassionate listening, we are better able to listen beneath surface emotions and appearances to the deeper places where we, and others, are hurting. Prayerful listening from that deeper place opens our hearts and minds to the pain and distress, our own and others, that otherwise might go unnoticed. Listening deeply to sorrow however it shows up in our lives and relationships is an important step on our journey of practicing compassion.

One spiritual prayer practice that can enhance our ability to listen is the Daily Examen. While we can apply this practice to any area of our lives, we can use it in a particular way to help us pay attention to where God may be guiding us in our practice of deep listening (the full practice is on pp. 80–81). First, we sit quietly as we listen for God. Then, looking back over the day, we notice times when we felt most alive and thank God for those moments; times when we felt the least grateful and offer those with thanks to God; times when we offered or received, or weren't able to offer or receive, the gift of compassionate listening; and finally, we notice moments when we either felt aligned with, or far from, living out God's purpose for our lives and offer these to God too.

One of the gifts of this practice is that it strengthens our ability to be fully present with ourselves as we listen for God. This, in turn, strengthens our ability to listen to others in a loving, kind, and generous way that reflects our desire, with God's help, to respond compassionately as we are able.

Making it Personal: If you engaged with the Daily Examen practice, were you surprised by anything that came up around your willingness to practice compassionate listening? Any new ah-ha's, insights, or inspiration? Is there anything you feel ready to do based on what you learned from this practice?

Thursday, March 9, 2023

Learning from the Good Samaritan

Scott Stoner

"Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

—Luke 10:36-37

The story of the Good Samaritan from the tenth chapter of Luke is one of the best-known teachings of Jesus about compassion. In this parable, a man has been beaten up and left for dead by the side of the road. A priest and a Levite both see the man and pass by him, not wanting to get involved. Then the Samaritan comes by, chooses to respond fully to the man, and offers him what he needs to heal.

Many factors are involved in this story of compassion, but it all starts with someone being willing to listen. Like the first two men, we too at times choose to walk around the suffering of another, not wanting to be a witness to what they are experiencing, perhaps because it makes us uncomfortable. To truly listen to another's suffering is to risk getting close to their pain and allowing ourselves to feel it. When we listen in that sincere way, we may find ourselves moved so deeply that we can no longer merely walk on by. Once we learn what they need, we may be moved to show compassion.

The Good Samaritan is a model for all of us of what it means to not ignore or walk around the pain of another, of what it means to choose to listen and respond with compassion.

Making it Personal: As you reflect today, you might want to reread the parable found in Luke 10:25-37. How does the Parable of the Good Samaritan speak to you about listening and compassion? Is there a particular person or situation that God is calling you to listen to and offer compassion to, perhaps one that initially makes you uncomfortable?

Friday, March 10, 2023

Listening with the Ears of Our Heart

Robbin Brent

The greatest thing you can do in this life is to cultivate and exercise compassion. Life is about learning how to flow with your basic goodness. It's about entering the heart and making it the fount of your being.

—Robert Lax

I get so much pleasure from watching and listening to my grandchildren play. They seem instinctively to listen with the ears of their heart, engaging and responding wholeheartedly to the world around them. Perhaps they are infused with joy and boundless energy because they don't spend precious energy overthinking their experience. They simply take it in, reveling in all of God's creation. Just as children do naturally, how can we learn to better listen with the ears of our heart?

One way we can learn to listen like a child is by showing up in the present moment and paying attention, being curious rather than judgmental. That quality of open, kind presence creates a spaciousness in which we can learn to see and hear with the eyes of our heart, from love, not fear.

Paul also provides some useful tips. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:16-18). When we cultivate joy, a regular prayer practice, and a commitment to notice what we are most grateful for each day, we learn how to move beneath the level of the mind to listen from a place of love, kindness, and deep compassion. From this place we get a richer sense of what it is like to be deeply and truly seen, heard, and loved by God. From this place we infuse our lives, and the lives of others, with the infinite joyful love of God.

Making it Personal: What do you think of the idea that we can better hear what matters most when we listen with the ears of our heart? Do you think Paul's wise counsel—expressing joy, praying often, and looking for what we are most grateful each day—might support your desire to listen from your heart rather than simply your head? If so, what is one that you are ready to practice regularly this Lent?

Saturday, March 11, 2023

What Can Jesus Do for You?

Jan Kwiatkowski

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.
—Matthew 11:28

Many years ago, I spoke with my pastor about some challenging medical things our family was facing. I hadn't gone into the conversation looking for something specific; I was just updating him on what was happening. As he always did, he listened deeply and patiently, giving me all the time I needed. He was listening, not only to what I was saying, but also to what I might have left unsaid. Once I was finished, we sat for a few moments in silence, and then he looked at me, noting how tired I was, and asked a seemingly simple question: "What can Jesus do for you?"

I was more than a little thrown by his question. The initial knee-jerk response I heard in my head was "I have no idea," which was joined by numerous other things simultaneously running through my mind. "Jesus do something for me? Jesus is my role model, guide, teacher, and faithful companion. Isn't that enough? Besides, I've got too much to do and think about and worry about to be spending time and energy wondering what I need. Why should I bother Jesus with what I need when it seems minimal compared to the needs of so many others in the world?"

Despite all that going on in my head, I left that day without giving my pastor much of an answer, yet I've continued to revisit and respond to his question many times since then. Experience has taught me that when I allow my heart to know and speak its deepest needs, there is a compassionate, close-to-my-heart Jesus who hears. I've come to understand that to practice self-compassion is to accept a gift from a Jesus who hears, knows, and generously offers what my heart most needs.

Making it Personal: What was your initial response to the question, "What can Jesus do for you"? How do you understand the relationship between listening and self-compassion? What can Jesus do for you?

The Third Sunday in Lent

March 12, 2023

The Gift of Kindness

Jana Troutman-Miller

Love and kindness are never wasted. They always make a difference. They bless the one who receives them, and they bless you, the giver.

—Barbara De Angelis

Many years ago, while visiting friends in Europe, I experienced one of the most lovely moments of compassion extended to me from a stranger. I had been in Prague several days and was leaving by train to go on to Germany. It was my birthday. At the station, sensing that I was feeling sad about saying goodbye and being alone for the next ten hours on the train, my friends gave me tender hugs and three roses to keep me company—wonderful acts of both kindness and compassion.

Along the way, an older gentleman came on board with a large bundle of at least six-dozen long-stemmed roses. He gently placed the flowers overhead, sat down across from me, and began to chat with the man next to him. After a while he stood up, took down the roses, and gave one to the other man. Then he looked over at me and said something to me in German. When I told him that I didn't understand, he motioned to my three roses with a questioning look. I realized then what he was asking and I told him that it was my birthday and that my friends gave these to me to help keep me company. He smiled, then carefully selected one of his roses and presented it to me. Deeply moved by his kind, compassionate gesture, I thanked him over and over as I fought back tears. Soon we were at our next stop where the man got off. As he was leaving he told me that he loves being able to do kind things for people to make them happy.

That seemingly small gesture meant so much to me. Without even realizing it until that moment, receiving a rose from this stranger was just what I needed. I also realized that he too had a need met that day. His need

was to show kindness and compassion, and that need was met when he gave me the rose and I received it with a heart overflowing with gratitude.

While we all have a desire to give and receive compassion, all too often we don't allow others to offer us that gift, especially in those moments when we don't feel worthy to receive someone's compassion. And so we say some version of, "No, that's okay, you keep your rose." When that happens, both of us are deprived of the healing power of kindness and compassion.

But when we allow ourselves to receive kindness and compassion from others, it connects us in deep and profound ways. I still think of this man twenty years later and each time I do, I offer a prayer of gratitude for him. Through this experience I continue to be reminded to look for those moments when God invites me to be with another in a time of need, or allowing them to be present for me in my time of need. This man's simple act of compassionate kindness has continued to offer me the healing gift of happiness for many years, and I pray it continues to offer that healing gift to him, as well.

Monday, March 13, 2023

Compassion and Prayer

Scott Stoner

Pray as though everything depended on God.
Work as though everything depended on you.
—Saint Augustine

When someone shares with me that they are suffering in some way or facing a great challenge, I always try to listen deeply to what they are saying, resisting any urges to offer advice or platitudes. After I feel I have heard them and understand as best I can what they are going through, I often say to them, "I will hold you and your concerns in my prayers."

This Lent we have learned that compassion involves the awareness of another person's suffering joined by a desire to alleviate that suffering. Letting someone know that we will pray for them, or that we are praying for them, is a compassionate response because it offers reassurance that no matter what they are going through, they are not alone. It is also true that knowing someone is praying for us can help to ease our own suffering. In this expression of prayer we see a twofold connection between compassion and prayer, the theme for this week's reflections.

Personally, I know that many times when I have shared with someone that I have been praying for them, they respond by saying that they could feel the prayers. And I find great comfort when I know others are praying for me. This is the mystical power of prayer as a way of offering compassion to someone who is hurting. Compassion and prayer are at the heart of the Christian life. This week we will explore how compassion and prayer are connected and how each informs the other. We have curated and included prayers related to the theme of *Practicing Compassion* on pp. 78–79.

Making it Personal: What are your initial thoughts about the connection between compassion and prayer? Have you ever felt comforted by knowing that someone was praying for you? Are there people currently for whom you pray regularly?

Tuesday, March 14, 2023

Being Attentive

Scott Stoner

Let us be grateful, let us be attentive, let us be
open to what has never happened before.
—John Philip Newell

"Pay attention to what you pay attention to" is a saying that is at the heart of many of our Living Compass wellness resources. We know that what we pay attention to is what will grow in our lives. Prayer is one way we direct our attention to focus more on who we want to be and who God wants us to be.

As we explore the connection between prayer and compassion this week, I invite you to focus some attention in your prayer life on praying for compassion. Pray for compassion for yourself, and pray for a deepening of your practice of offering compassion to others.

John Philip Newell is a writer and retreat leader who draws heavily on the wisdom of Celtic Christianity. He has written a beautiful prayer called *Presence* that I will close with. It is a prayer about presence and being attentive, two crucial aspects of practicing compassion.

In the gift of this new day,
in the gift of the present moment,
in the gift of time and eternity intertwined,
let us be grateful,
let us be attentive,
let us be open to what has never happened before,
in the gift of this new day,
in the gift of the present moment,
in the gift of time and eternity intertwined.
—*Presence*, from *Sounds of the Eternal: A Celtic Psalter*, 2002

Making it Personal: What speaks to you in this prayer? Do you see a connection between being attentive and being compassionate?

Wednesday, March 15, 2023

Prayers Written from the Heart

Robbin Brent

Beloved, help me to know I am never alone. Help me to trust in ever deepening ways that you created me in love to be an instrument of your healing life-giving love and compassion.

When suffering is present, it is natural to ask why it is happening and to wonder where God is in the midst of the pain. Listening deeply in prayer offers us a window into our need to wait for God, trusting in the expanded reality of God's timing, and trusting that God is always present. This week's theme inspired me to write a prayer to God, and then to write what I imagine God's compassionate response might be. It turned out to be a deep and prayerful call and response practice where I listened for guidance, trusting that God also dwells in my imagination. Here is part of my prayer:

> *Beloved, why is it so hard for me to fully believe that you love me, especially when I am at my lowest ebb, covered over in doubt, anger, and fear? Help me to trust in ever deepening ways that you created me in love to be an instrument of your healing life-giving love and compassion. Help me to know I am never alone. Amen.*

Part of the response to my prayer:

> *Beloved of My Heart, you are growing each and every day in your trust and acceptance of how much I love you. Endlessly, without reserve. Trust that. Even when you suffering. Especially then. You were created in love to be an instrument of my infinite love and compassion. You are never alone. I will never let you go.*

If writing a prayer appeals to you, you might begin by prayerfully opening your imagination and listening, trusting that God is there with you. You could also find a prayer that you are drawn to at this point in your life. We have included additional prayers related to compassion on pp 78–79.

Making it Personal: If you chose to write a prayer to and/or from God, what was the experience like for you? Did you discover anything surprising or insightful in your prayer? If you chose to find a prayer, which one or ones were you drawn to right now?

Thursday, March 16, 2023

The Merton Prayer

Scott Stoner

I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.
—Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton was a Cistercian monk who wrote prolifically from 1943 to1968 about living a life deeply rooted in prayer and compassion. One of his most popular prayers is known simply as *The Merton Prayer*. I love this prayer for its humility. It is an honest prayer where Merton, who so many admire as a person of deep faith, acknowledges that sometimes even he feels lost in his desire to follow God. I am moved by the vulnerability and self-compassion he expresses in this prayer.

> *My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. / I do not see the road ahead of me. / I cannot know for certain where it will end. / nor do I really know myself, / and the fact that I think I am following your will / does not mean that I am actually doing so. / But I believe that the desire to please you / does in fact please you. / And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. / I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.*
>
> *And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, / though I may know nothing about it. / Therefore will I trust you always though / I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. / I will not fear, for you are ever with me, / and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*
>
> —The Merton Prayer, from *Thoughts in Solitude,* Copyright © 1956, 1958 by The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani

Making it Personal: In what way does this prayer written by Thomas Merton speak to you? Do you see Merton praying for self-compassion in this prayer? What other connections do you see between this prayer and our theme of compassion?

Friday, March 17, 2023

Holy Women, Wisdom, and Prayer

Robbin Brent

Holy Spirit, giving life to all life, moving all creatures, root of all things, washing them clean, wiping out their mistakes, healing their wounds, you are our true life, luminous, wonderful, awakening the heart from its ancient sleep. Amen.

—St. Hildegard von Bingen

I created a small space in my home years ago where I could pause to pray each day. Just recently I found myself looking at and truly seeing my prayer space, as if for the first time. I've placed many treasured items here over the years to remind me of God's goodness, compassion, and love—an unusual shell, a drawing my grandson made for me, a smooth stone found at an important crossroads in my life, icons of all sorts, flowers, candles, a singing bowl. But what struck me on this particular morning was all of the women who had joined me in the space: Icons of Mary, mother of Jesus; three of Mary Magdalene; Hildegard of Bingen; three women of color modeled on the Rublev Trinity; and a small statue of Kuan Yin, the Tibetan deity of compassion and mercy given to me by my son.

While each is imbued with particular gifts, all serve as models of compassionate devotion, service, faithfulness, love, and healing. All model profound ways of sharing love in the world. Through their steadfast compassionate presence, I have more deeply experienced the fullness of the heart of God.

I want to be more like them. I want to embrace and embody gifts from each in my own life and spiritual journey. While I might not have always seen these holy women with my eyes, I have been blessed by their loving, wise, compassionate companionship every day as I pray.

Making it Personal: I often like to pray using the prayers of holy women, like the one above from Hildegard. Do you have particular prayers you turn to when you pray? Who or what inspires you as you pray? If you have a prayer space, what do you see when you look closely? Who or what might you choose to remind you of God's compassionate love?

Saturday, March 18, 2023

Closer to Home

Jan Kwiatkowski

Taking this world as it is and not as I would have it; trusting that You will make all things right if I surrender to Your will.
—Reinhold Niebuhr

Years ago, when I was in parish ministry, members of the church and I were wrestling with what it means to be compassionate, both in our church life, and in our individual lives. We noticed that we often found it easier to discuss people who were distant from us—people with whom we would likely never come in contact—than it was to discuss people and conditions closer to home.

Closer in, we tended to complain about crabby clerks at the grocery checkout, neighbors doing laundry late at night, or the ladies who insisted on using the silverware for coffee hour when those disposable wooden stir sticks would do just fine. We griped about times we were tired because one of our kids was sick and kept us up.

It took us time and reflection to realize that the way we were responding to those close by wasn't life-giving, for them or for us. And it was a long way from compassion. So we committed to praying regularly for the capacity to extend greater compassion to those with whom we lived and worked and worshipped. And along the way, we gleaned many gifts from our shared practice of compassionate prayer.

One prayer that always opened and softened our minds and hearts was the Serenity Prayer. Part of it is above. The full prayer is on p. 78. I pray that it continues to open our hearts to those closer to home.

Making it Personal: Who is not too far from you that might need prayer and compassion right now? Can you think of a time when you found it more challenging to respond compassionately toward those closer to home?

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 19, 2023

Help Yourself? Help Others.

Chris Yaw

Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."
—John 9:39

A research study was recently done to help people with Multiple Sclerosis (MS). Researchers studied 132 patients with MS, splitting them into two groups. Both learned coping skills. Group #1 learned from respected experts in the field, while Group #2 learned from their peers: five fellow MS patients who had shown an interest in helping fellow sufferers and had undergone special training. The goal was to see which group fared better.

The surprise finding was that neither group fared as well as did the five MS sufferers who had been trained to offer support to Group #2. Researchers noted dramatic changes in how they viewed themselves and their lives. Depression, self-confidence, and self-esteem improved markedly. The study concluded that giving support improved health more than receiving it, with one researcher concluding, "These people had undergone a spiritual transformation that gave them a refreshed view of who they were."

The idea that compassionately caring for others brings healing for caregivers is as old as it is neglected. When you and I hurt we turn inward, our attention focuses on ourselves, and we don't naturally think that actively showing compassion to others might benefit us. But it does.

In John 9 we witness an iconic healing scenario, when Jesus has compassion on a blind man, heals him, and causes the upholders of the religious institution great consternation. They simply cannot make sense of Jesus and what he's trying to do. We see these religious folks choosing pride over humility, prestige over service, and judgment over compassion.

In the introduction to the book, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*, co-author Henri Nouwen points out that compassion comes from two Latin words, which together mean *to suffer with*. Jesus is pointing out that those who were in a position to suffer with, but chose not to, become subject to negative consequences. Being blind to compassion keeps us from reaping compassion's rewards, which are none other than healing, restoration, and reconciliation.

In *Compassion*, Nouwen goes on to write: "Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human."

So, we might ask ...

In what ways are we avoiding compassion, and thus missing out on its benefits?

How are we choosing our own comfort, convenience, and safety over the "suffering with" of others?

How might we better develop compassion in ourselves?

I'd like to share a daily affirmation that helps me stay compassionately present: *Have gratitude for the past, compassion for the present, and faith for the future.* May it be so.

Monday, March 20, 2023

Compassion and Mercy

Scott Stoner

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.
—Psalm 51:1 (NIV)

Mercy is a word that is found repeatedly in the Bible. Sometimes it appears when a person is asking for God to have mercy on them. Other times it appears when talking about how God or Jesus shows mercy on those who are suffering in some way. Some passages exhort believers to show mercy to others.

This week's reflections will focus on the relationship between compassion and mercy. We learned previously that one definition of compassion is "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it." One initial way to think about mercy is that it is the way we put our desire to alleviate another person's suffering into action. An act of mercy is an expression of compassion.

Mercy can be expressed in several ways, including visiting people who are sick or imprisoned, feeding those who are hungry, providing clothing and housing for people in need, forgiving, offering comfort to those who are afflicted, and praying for others.

In yesterday's reflection, Chris Yaw, with the help of author Henri Nouwen, reminded us that "compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human." This week we will explore how mercy calls us more deeply into that "full immersion."

Making it Personal: What initial thoughts do you have about the relationship between compassion and mercy? Can you think of a time when someone showed mercy to you? How about a time when you showed mercy to someone else? How did it feel?

Tuesday, March 21, 2023

Mercy and Forgiveness

Scott Stoner

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

—Luke 6:36-37

One characteristic of mercy is that it is the free offering of compassion to another by someone who has the freedom to choose whether to give or withhold that offering. And so we see in the passage above that forgiveness is included as an expression of mercy.

Extending forgiveness to someone who has hurt us is an expression of mercy because our decision to offer forgiveness is a choice we are free to make. When we extend forgiveness, we act in a way that shows mercy to the person who has caused the hurt.

I remember many years ago when I chose to offer forgiveness to someone who had hurt me. I discovered that not only was I offering a gift of mercy to the other person, but it also turned out to be a gift for me. I felt lighter and freer as I let go of my hurt and resentment.

The mercy of God is both our source and our model for being merciful. This is why Jesus said, "Be merciful just as your Father is merciful." We are the recipients of God's mercy, and then, in turn, we are called to be the ones who extend that mercy to others. Just as we are offered the gift of forgiveness from God, we also seek to provide that gift of forgiveness to others.

Making it Personal: What do you think of the idea that forgiveness is an act of mercy? Is there someone in your life to whom you would like to extend the mercy of forgiveness? What benefits do you see for others *and* for yourself when you choose to extend compassion and mercy?

Wednesday, March 22, 2023

The Heart of the Heart of God

Robbin Brent

Can a woman forget her nursing-child, or show
no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.
—Isaiah 49:15

Mercy is where we encounter the fullness of the heart of God. The Greek and Hebrew root words for mercy translated include steadfast love, goodness, forgiveness, strength, lovingkindness, healing care and love, and innermost depth (womb).

Our Lady of the Sign and *Mary of the Cosmos* are two icons that depict Mary with an infant or a globe in her womb. These images reveal a God who has created us and loves us as a mother or father loves their beloved infant from the core of their being. This awareness has expanded my understanding of God as One who profoundly loves and cares for each and every one of us as beloved children, offering mercy through life-giving nourishment, care, love, and protection from the center of the center of God's own heart.

When we respond compassionately toward ourselves and others, *with all our heart*, from the innermost depth or core of our being, the compassion and mercy we offer are medicine for our minds, our hearts, our bodies, and our souls. They heal and transform because through them we experience God's ever-present love and care for us. God's mercy always pours forth from God's healing love because both come from the same source, the heart of the heart of God.

I find great comfort in knowing that whenever I can practice compassion and mercy, toward myself or another, I am serving as a bridge for God's healing love.

Making it Personal: What do you think of the idea of God loving us from the deepest part of God, as deeply as a mother or father loves an infant growing in the womb? Have you ever experienced healing or reconciliation through an act of lovingkindness? If yes, what was that like?

Thursday, March 23, 2023

Acts of Mercy

Scott Stoner

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?
—James 2:14

For many centuries the Church has taught the importance of what are known as the Seven Acts of Mercy, which are to: give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the prisoners, and to bury the dead. The first six of these come from Matthew 25, where Jesus says, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matt. 25:35-36). The Church later added the seventh act, to bury the dead, which included providing a proper burial for all people, as well as caring for those who are grieving.

The importance of the Acts of Mercy can also be seen in the passage above from James. To paraphrase, one could say, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, to say you have compassion but do not express your compassion through acts of mercy?"

As a person of faith, I see the Acts of Mercy as an invitation and a reminder to put my faith into action. When I am conscious of these acts and pray to be open to seeing a specific way I might express one of these acts, I always encounter an opportunity to do so. I invite you to bring these Acts of Mercy into your prayers and see what opportunities open up for you to express compassion to others.

Making it Personal: Is there a particular act of the Seven Acts of Mercy that you feel called to offer to someone in your life? Are there others acts of mercy that you would add to this list? If so, what are they?

Friday, March 24, 2023

Willing to Wait

Robbin Brent

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

"Patient" is not an attribute my family and close friends would choose to describe me. It might not even make it into the top ten. Yet, as the above quote tells us, patient trust is what will allow us to better see how God's work in the world is unfolding, and how God is asking us to more fully participate in God's dreams for the world made manifest through us.

Patience and compassion are closely related at their root and can mean to suffer, to endure, to experience, or to wait. They also are defined as God's passion, as God's great love and hope for the world. So if patience, compassion, mercy, and God's love are interwoven, how do we get better at being patient, of trusting more fully in God's timing? In yesterday's reflection, Scott Stoner shared the Seven Acts of Mercy as important ways of living compassionately through what we do. He invited us to a practice of prayerfully seeking God's guidance for how we might offer one of those acts of mercy to someone in our lives. This is a wonderful way to practice putting our trust more fully in God's timing.

If we can be patient with ourselves as we learn to be more fully present with another in their suffering, and to respond out of a desire to help in some way, we are better able to call upon the gifts, or fruits, of compassion: kindness, mercy, empathy, goodness, and forgiveness. Patience and trust will also strengthen our ability to notice when God is asking us to be the arms of love and mercy in the world. We get better at trusting God's timing more than our own.

Making it Personal: What do you think about the connection between having patience and trust and being better able to respond with compassion and mercy to the needs of the world, others, and ourselves? What is one practice that might help you to be more patient? Do you have a quote, poem, or prayer that might inspire your desire to trust more deeply in the way God is working through you in the world?

Saturday, March 25, 2023

Being There Matters

Jan Kwiatkowski

At the cross her station keeping, stood the mournful
Mother weeping, close to Jesus to the last.
—from the hymn *At the Cross Her Station Keeping*, written by Jacopone da Todi; translation by Edward Caswall

On Thursday, Scott Stoner explored the Seven Acts of Mercy and how they offer specific ways we can offer compassion and mercy to those who are suffering in ways visible, tangible, and obvious. As a therapist and pastor, in addition to the visible suffering of others, I also encounter the not-so-obvious pain of anxiety, fear, loss, depression, hopelessness, and loneliness.

Our society values being anything but vulnerable. Admitting our own need for mercy and compassion and recognizing countless quiet cries for mercy and compassion around us are counter-cultural and yet what our world so desperately needs. Compounding this issue, those silenced and often-shamed people suffering from anxiety, fear, loss, depression, hopelessness, and loneliness often hide in ways that make it hard for others to respond to with compassion and mercy. In these situations, it is important to remember that even when we don't see a way of responding concretely to the needs of those quietly suffering, the gift of being present is enough.

Just a few stood at the foot of the cross, not able to do anything other than be there. Standing at the foot of the cross and holding each other and the dying Lord of Life in compassionate mercy and presence is an example beyond words of the value of our presence and compassion.

Making it Personal: Describe a time when the only thing you could do was to be present and what that was like for you. Has there been a time when someone was there for you during a dark time in your life? What was that like for you? If there is someone in your life who might be open to the mercy of compassionate presence, what might be a simple way you could be present for them?

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 26, 2023

Embracing Belovedness

Martha Bourlakas

Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"
—John 11:40

I have heard *The Word is very near you* for most of my adult life, but I wasn't getting it. I knew I *should* understand that the infinite love of God and the Universe is not reserved for me only after everyone else has received theirs. I *should* be able to integrate this Word into my heart and life, living into God's intimacy with me. My relationship with God and myself changed when I realized the *shoulds* were part of the problem. Instead of where I should be, here I am. When I receive God's love and compassion for my Self first, as I am, I acknowledge the power of the Holy Spirit moving and acting within me.

My realization began with the word *selfish,* a word our religious systems, our culture, our families have long taught us—especially women—is the worst possible word. Isn't it selfish of me to address the love and care I need, before considering others? After all, I am a Mom, a wife, a daughter, a friend. If I don't put all the love and attention towards everyone else first, I am not following the Christian teachings of self-sacrifice I have always learned. The Holy Spirit within me was not settled on this idea, and she got blow-y, began stirring up things within me. I picked up my pen and started writing.

For two years, every single day, I wrote in my journal, *I am a beloved child of God.* This was my way of praying, understanding, believing it is not selfish of me to put myself first in receiving God's love and care. I need and deserve this wondrous, expansive love, here and now. God's abundant love is always available, not meted out after we have done all the *right* things. The words are teaching me that the best way for me to navigate marriage, parenting, friendships, work—all of it—is to turn

God's love and compassion first toward myself. From *this* love and relationship stem all other abundant, life-giving relationships and work.

The Holy Spirit blows through our bodies, our souls, our world, in a different way from what history and culture have taught us, expressing God's creative radicalness. She teaches us that The Word, Belovedness, Wisdom are urgent, immediate, not rewarded after we accomplish our tasks, eat the rainbow, exercise, say all the right things. She knows if we are last, our outward love and service is fractured, resentful, full of loaded-up *shoulds*—not the kind of love we all need and deserve to receive. When we acknowledge and incorporate intimate love and care for ourselves, we begin to structure our lives differently, rooting ourselves in acts and movements of belovedness and ease.

I hope when I am 65, maybe 95, I am still writing in my journal, reminding myself *I am a beloved child of God*. Embracing belovedness can be a slow process, but I *should* not be any further along, or at any other place, other than where I am. On days when I struggle, face-to-face with the-Martha-that-should, I turn my face to the springtime sun, stay right where I am—in my compassion, in my belovedness, with my pen and paper. The Martha that is.

Monday, March 27, 2023

Compassion and Well-Being

Scott Stoner

If you want others to be happy, practice compassion.
If you want to be happy, practice compassion.
—Dalai Lama

This week we will focus on the relationship between compassion and well-being. The above quote from the Dalai Lama captures how compassion enhances the well-being of others and ourselves.

Martha Bourlakas reminded us in her writing yesterday of the importance of self-compassion, something we will focus on in other reflections this week. For now, I want to say that caring for our own well-being is essential for our ability to offer kindness and mercy to others.

I love the Prayer of St. Francis because it is a prayer that invites us to be instruments of peace, love, kindness, and compassion in a world that so very much needs all the spiritual nourishment we can give (full prayer on p. 79). As a guitarist, when I read the words *make us an instrument,* I think of how I cannot produce music for others to enjoy if I do not take the time to tune the strings before I play. This always reminds me that I need to regularly keep my well-being in tune so that I am able to offer compassion more easily, which can enhance the well-being of others.

We also know that caring for the suffering of others has a positive impact on *our* own well-being. In his reflection for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, Chris Yaw shared a study that confirms this truth. We are called to love our neighbor *and* ourselves, and keeping a healthy balance between the two is essential to both our well-being, and the well-being of others.

Making it Personal: What are your initial thoughts about the connection between compassion and well-being? How do you recognize if your well-being, your "instrument," is out of tune? What helps you get back in tune and stay in tune?

Tuesday, March 28, 2023

Clothe Yourself with Compassion

Scott Stoner

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.
—Colossians 3:12

Jesus calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves. His call is one of the two great commandments, to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

While Jesus does direct us, as his followers, to do this, we are wise to realize that not only is offering compassion to others central to our faith, but it is also foundational to our well-being.

The practice of compassion is both a fruit of, and a contributor to, well-being. To realize the truth of this, we need only think of a time when our hearts and emotions have been tense, anxious, angry, and constricted. When we feel like this, this is our smaller, ego-based self. And when our smaller self is dominant, it is important to recognize that our well-being is compromised and that we are not in a place to enhance another's well-being.

Now think of a time when your larger, spiritual self was dominant. This is the self that responds from an expanded heart and soul. From this expanded place, as the words of the Scripture above say, we are able to clothe ourselves with "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." We experientially recognize that our well-being, as well as the well-being of others, is truly enhanced when living from this larger, spiritual space.

Just as we can decide how to dress ourselves each day in order to look our best, we can also decide to clothe ourselves with loving actions, including compassion, in order to respond from the heart.

Making it Personal: Read the verse from Colossians above and notice what speaks to you. Can you recognize when your smaller, ego-centered self is activated vs. when your larger, spiritual self is present? What might help you to make a choice to clothe yourself with more compassion each day?

Wednesday, March 29, 2023

The Golden Rule

Robbin Brent

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.
—Matthew 7:12

Karen Armstrong included the Golden Rule found in Matthew in her compelling definition of compassion: "To put ourselves in somebody else's shoes, to feel her pain as though it were our own, and to enter generously into his point of view. That is why compassion is aptly summed up in the Golden Rule, which asks us to look into our own hearts, discover what gives us pain, and then refuse, under any circumstance whatsoever, to inflict that pain on anybody else."

Embedded in this definition of compassion and also in the Golden Rule is the wisdom, "we can't give away what we don't have." Both point toward the importance of first knowing how we want to be treated, how we want to be loved. How can we accompany others compassionately if we don't know that for ourselves? How can we treat others well if we don't know what it is like to treat ourselves well?

We cannot extend compassion if we don't first know self-compassion. If we don't learn what causes us pain and then offering ourselves compassion, we will have a harder time recognizing suffering in another. We will find it challenging to respond with a desire to alleviate their pain if we haven't first known that desire as a compassionate response toward our own pain.

A practice of self-compassion offers a foundation of stability and well-being that we can count on both in times of struggle and success. From that foundation we can begin to know—as Martha Bourlakas wrote so beautifully about in last Sunday's reflection—that we, and others, are beloved children of God.

Making it Personal: What do you think of the connection between practicing self-compassion and our ability to offer compassion to another? Between self-compassion and well-being? Have you found that extending compassion toward yourself helped you to be more responsive to the needs of others?

Thursday, March 30, 2023

Be an Encourager

Scott Stoner

Be an encourager. The world has enough critics already.
—Dave Willis

I live in Wisconsin, and one of my favorite rites of spring is getting my bike out and ready for the first outdoor ride of the season. One of the first things I need to do is pump up the tires because most of the air leaks out of them over our long winters.

Have you ever tried to ride a bike with an under-inflated or even a flat tire? If so, you know how hard and bumpy the ride can be and how much effort it takes to get it to move. I think of this as a metaphor for the importance of compassion and encouragement, both for others *and* for ourselves.

To make our travels through life a bit less challenging, all of us can use a little air in our tires, a little extra encouragement, from time to time. Just as the air slowly leaks out of bike tires over a long winter, life itself can deflate us over time and our self-esteem and sense of well-being may suffer. When this happens, expressions of compassion and encouragement, for ourselves and others, can go a long way toward pumping up our emotional "tires."

Be an encourager. The first three words in the quote above by Dave Willis are so simple that it can be easy to miss their power. Offering encouraging words to your child, partner, friend, colleague, family member, or even to a stranger, is so simple, yet we often can see the positive effects immediately. It's that easy and that powerful. Our compassion and encouragement might be just the air someone needs to lift them up and make their ride just a little smoother and more manageable. And remember, it is nice to share this same generosity of spirit with oneself.

Making it Personal: How could you be more accepting and encouraging of yourself? Think of something specific. Is there someone in your life who could also use some encouragement right now? Again, think of something specific you could do or say.

Friday, March 31, 2023

Everything Is Connected

Robbin Brent

When we talk about God, we're talking about the very straightforward affirmation that everything has a singular, common source and is infinitely, endlessly, deeply connected.

—Rob Bell

The understanding that everything is connected is foundational to the Living Compass Model for Well-Being. We introduced this on p. 9 with the image of a kinesthetic mobile, describing how, when we touch one area of well-being on the mobile we affect all the other areas. Similarly, as with the spider's web we explored in week one, if we touch one strand, the entire web vibrates.

We've explored the idea of everything being connected throughout the reflections this week. Our ability to recognize and invite in love and care for ourselves is connected to our ability to love and care for others. Once we've experienced the gift of healing and wholeness that accompanies loving mercy and self-compassion, we now have a gift we can share with others. We reflected on how loving others by learning how we want to be loved is connected to deep well-being. And how a practice of compassion enhances our desire for others to be happy, as well as our own desire to be happy.

Everything is connected by the sacred strands in the infinite web of God's love. These sturdy strands include compassion, mercy, intimacy, generosity, virtue, reverence, wisdom, patience, truthfulness, steadfast determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity, all coming from the innermost depths of our being. When we make a commitment to cultivate these and bring them into our relationship with ourselves, with others, and with our planet, we grow and strengthen the kind of compassion that has the power to bless and heal the world.

Making it Personal: What is your response to the idea that everything is interconnected in a sacred web of God's love? Have you experienced the connection between one area of well-being and the other areas described above and illustrated through the mobile on p. 9? What other examples come to mind?

Saturday, April 1, 2023

Saying No—a Compassionate Choice

Jan Kwiatkowski

Self-care is a Divine Responsibility.
—Anonymous

We all have days when practicing compassion comes more effortlessly than on other days. The demands of practicing compassion can sometimes feel overwhelming because the needs in our world are so great. In these overwhelming moments, we bump up against discovering our human limits. We've been taught to give, not count the cost, and to be selfless rather than selfish. Yet if we continue to give at our own expense, we can exhaust ourselves and become resentful, numb, irritable, even depressed. John Pavlovitz describes this as feeling "really tired, marrow-deep, hope-sucking, soul-choking exhausted."

Not only is it not possible to be selfless all the time, it isn't good for our souls. We live within finite bodies and if we put the needs of others so thoroughly ahead of our own too much of the time, we can do injury to the body, mind, and spirit God gave us. Taking care of others at the expense of our own well-being can keep us from doing the work God calls us to do.

We can learn much from noticing the compassionate choice Jesus made—in the midst of his demanding ministry tending to the great needs in his world—to also take care of himself. Recognizing his dependence on God, we are told that Jesus would withdraw to private places because he needed to pause, pray, and reconnect with the Source of Compassion. He chose to say "no" to others for a short time so he could say "yes" again to living into the will of his Father. Maybe we need to reframe choosing self-care, not as selfishness, but as a humble recognition of our finite self, needing to pause, pray, and reconnect with our Source of Compassion.

Making it Personal: What is your initial response to this reflection? Have there been times when extending compassion to others becomes too much and you became resentful, numb, or soul-choking tired? Where and how are you being nudged to say "no" to others so that you might be more compassionate toward yourself?

Palm Sunday

April 2, 2023

God's Liberating Love

Deborah Woolsey

You must be a world unto yourself and with your difficult thing in your center, drawing you to it. And one day, with its weight, its gravity, it will have its effects beyond you, on a destiny, on a person, on God. Then, when it's ready, God will enter into your difficult thing. And do you know anywhere else where you and God can meet?

—Rainer Maria Rilke

For years people of all walks of life have asked the question: "Why is there suffering?" Societies, individuals, institutions, religions, academic, and scientific disciplines have all attempted to give an answer. Most often suffering is perceived as punishment for bad behavior or the consequence of bad choices.

One of the Latin definitions for *passio* means *suffering* and *com* means *with*. Today, on Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday, the church turns to Jesus for God's response to the question. As we witness Jesus going through the excruciating suffering of the betrayal and abandonment of his friends, a mockery of a trial, physical violence, and death, we are not given a reason for the *why* of suffering, we are given a *who*, someone who loves all of humanity so much they are willing to suffer with us. Jesus does not show us an angry god who desires punishment. He shows us a God who loves us so much that God is willing to suffer with us.

This response is empowering and helpful for me because it liberates me from the shame of judgment and helps me accept suffering as part of life. It also helps me to discern the difference between redemptive and non-redemptive suffering. For example, when I was recovering from two hip replacement surgeries, I went through a long and difficult recovery period. Seeing that time through the lens of Jesus suffering with me helped me recognize and receive the compassion offered by my caregivers, family, and friends who were able to be with me physically, mentally,

and spiritually. It also helped me respond compassionately to the medical caregivers who were suffering stress exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. By caring for each other we were able to alleviate both our burdens. Even though it might persist, this type of suffering doesn't last forever. It will change, things will get better, even if slowly, and we simply need to keep going, which we can do because we know we are not alone. That is what makes it redemptive, and it is just as true for the other types of suffering that also offer hope for healing change.

However, there are other forms of suffering that do not have a light at the end of the tunnel. Non-redemptive suffering happens when we get stuck in a toxic situation, such as an abusive workplace, school, relationship, any place where there is no compassion and no hope of change. In those circumstances, sometimes the best and most compassionate thing we can do is to distance ourselves from it.

By suffering with us, Jesus embodies how God's love truly is liberating and life-giving. Knowing this, when we suffer we are better able to recognize God's freeing love and, from this place of healing and returning wholeness, be more compassionate with ourselves and others.

April 3, 2023

Compassion and Love

Jan Kwiatkowski

I am a child of God. I always carry that with me.
—Maya Angelou

No matter how many times or years I have encountered the Holy Week Scriptures, I continue to find characters I love, don't understand, admire, or even dislike. One of my first memories of the Holy Week story was the distress I felt when hearing a story about terrible things happening to a really good person. I also remember feeling comforted that there were women close by who were with him to the end, even wiping his face with a cloth. At the same time, I was really angry at Peter when he denied him. He didn't do anything to help Jesus.

I also remember somehow knowing that, despite everything, God loved everyone in the Holy Week story. And to this day, my experiences as a pastor, therapist, and hospice chaplain has only deepened this belief in every cell of my being. Every person you or I love, don't understand, admire, or dislike is also a much-loved child of God.

This week, our final week in Lent, we will explore the gifts of compassion and love. Our acts of compassion are one way of reassuring our human brothers and sisters that they are deeply loved. I've found that identifying with a character in a scripture story helps me with my practice of compassion. Despite how I feel about their choices and actions within the story's context, I create a backstory that allows me to give them the benefit of doing the best they could. Transferring that practice to the present, I might tell myself that a driver cut me off because they need to get to the hospital for a family emergency. What might each character in the Holy Week story teach you about practicing compassion with all God's much-loved children, including yourself?

Making it Personal: I invite you to choose a Holy Week character to focus on as you read, pray, and reflect this week. What drew you to choose this particular person? Is there a character you avoided choosing? Reflect on that.

April 4, 2023

A World Upended

Jan Kwiatkowski

We won! We Won! The world turned upside down.
—from the song *Yorktown* (*The World Turned Upside Down),* from the musical *Hamilton*; music and lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda

I love *Hamilton* and have lost count of how many times I've watched it on the Disney channel. I saw the play live when it came to Milwaukee, and my alarm ringtone is *My Shot*. I recall the scene from *Hamilton* where the Revolutionary war was won despite enormous odds. The world seemed as if it had turned upside down. Given that we've all experienced the COVID pandemic, we have a shared sense of what it's like to have our world turned upside down and perhaps feel like we are in survival mode.

The world must have felt like it was turning upside down for the followers of Jesus as they witnessed the events we now call Holy Week. Everything they knew and believed in seemed to be coming apart at the seams. In my professional work and personal life experiences, I have seen that when our worlds seem to be turning upside down and we are in survival mode, loving compassion for ourselves and others is hard to come by. It's also the time compassion and love are most needed.

I'm guessing that most of the people who walked that last week with Jesus felt they were in survival mode and that compassion for self and others was hard to come by. And yet, I see compassion in Simon of Cyrene, who helped carry the cross, the women of Jerusalem who wiped the face of Jesus, and in Jesus' loving compassionate response to them. What might we learn from them or other Holy Week characters about extending compassion and love in a world turned upside down?

Making it Personal: Have there been times in your life when it's been harder to practice compassion than at other times, and what made that so? Were there other events in the Holy Week story that speak to you about compassion? Who is someone this week (include yourself as a choice) who needs a gesture of compassion?

April 5, 2023

Done and Left Undone

Jan Kwiatkowski

But I believe that the desire to please you, does in fact please you.
—Thomas Merton

Most likely you, like I did, started Lent with specific intentions and desires, and then found yourself having to adjust, perhaps letting go of some of your original intentions, or maybe you realized that you took on more than was possible this season. We all have a sense of what we did and were not able to do regarding practicing compassion toward ourselves and others. No matter where we find ourselves at this point, I don't think it matters to Jesus what any of us did or did not accomplish. What matters is that we paid attention as best we could, learned, stayed engaged, and continue to stay engaged in the process of practicing compassion.

At Living Compass we use the metaphor of watering a garden. Whether a community garden or one we cultivate at home, what we water and pay attention to is what will grow. In our gardens we get to see both what flourishes under our careful, loving attention, as well as what suffers from not enough watering.

It helps me to remember that we never 100% get any spiritual practice right. The reality that we sometimes "don't and can't" because we are human can be the perfect opportunity to practice self-compassion. Let us remember to be gentle with ourselves as we pay attention to where we are in our practice of compassion and the next steps we feel ready and inspired to take. Trust that God notices our desires. Trust that compassion and love surround us waking and sleeping, no matter what is done and left undone.

Making it Personal: How has your understanding of compassion evolved this Lenten season? What did you water well in your compassion garden, and what still needs attention? In what way could you extend compassion to yourself as you examine what was done and what was left undone?

Maundy Thursday

April 6, 2023

Living Lent with Compassion

Dawna Wall

And I wonder, particularly in a time where everything seems urgent, what the role of pause and breath is, in this season, to help us gear up for whatever this transformational moment we find ourselves in is.

—Rev. Jen Bailey

Author Joan Didion has written that it's important to keep our old journals so that we "stay on speaking terms with our younger selves." It's an idea echoed by Pádraig Ó Tuama in his poem *How to ~~Belong~~ Be Alone:* "What you need to do is to remember to talk to yourself between parties" … because "who you are is such an interesting conversation." One of the powerful aspects of Holy Week is the opportunity to consider the different selves we meet in the stories unfolding. The faithful, betraying, questioning, affirming, and denying that take place are familiar and sometimes frequent conversations we might have with various parts of our own stories. Sometimes when we're heading into unknown territory—conversations that will be difficult, a diagnosis for which we've been waiting, a journey of one kind or another—we nourish ourselves first, gathering with those we love in person or in blessed memory, and cloak ourselves in love.

The upper room represents a sacred nourishing gathering space because it is there we are reminded that Jesus shares a meal with all who are gathered, expressing how deeply he desires that time of being together. And like that gathering, our coming together with friends and family, or with various versions of ourselves, can sometimes be complicated, dreaded, or anticipated, and our processing of them might continue for days or years as we continue to give thanks for bread received, broken, and shared. The daily bread of questioning and wondering and pondering and grieving, the daily bread of accepting how everything is woven together to form the perfectly imperfect healing that is part of the ongoing work of compassion.



Facing unknown terrors, Jesus drew near to those he loved, sharing a meal and conversation, and then moved to the garden for prayer and solace as danger drew near. His dear friends found their eyes growing heavy as they struggled to stay present with him while also processing their own unwieldy emotions. We all know that heaviness—how difficult it is to keep looking with compassion on that which breaks our hearts.

One prayer practice that can help us stay in the space is a threefold way of praying, its own kind of triduum (the three days that tell the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that takes place from dusk this evening through dusk on Easter Sunday).

First, we pause and notice all the feelings: despair, fear, or discomfort, and then we welcome them for a moment, allowing them to abide with us, with kindness, in the tender way we might companion a frightened toddler. And then we receive the messages they share with compassionate love.

This practice echoes what I see Jesus doing this day: first pausing to listen to the present moment and all that it holds, offering hospitality and welcome to everything, and then receiving it all with love, even as he allows space for his own emotions. Today we witness his deep compassion for others, grounded and nourished by the compassion he was able to hold for self.

Good Friday

April 7, 2023

Holy Drama

Kyle Oliver

My song is love unknown
My Savior's love to me
Love to the loveless shown
That they might lovely be.
—Samuel Crossman

I have stark childhood memories of going to church on Good Friday. The ministers wore all black. The service was very long. The prayers were very serious. We kneeled for so long my knees hurt. At one point, the priest carried in a cross made of thick, pitted railroad ties. It was truly too heavy for him to carry.

The drama showed us lots of emotions, most of them negative. I took that as a sign that I was supposed to feel a certain way: sad, guilty, *burdened*. I thought the message of the day was something like this: Look at all the suffering we put Jesus through! That *I* put him through. The least we can do is to walk this path with him for a couple hours. Maybe then we'll be grateful for all he endured for us.

None of this is wrong, I suppose. I was right to want to explore, even experience, the emotions of the Good Friday drama for myself, rather than trying to shut them out or push them away. We *should* walk through this day fully open to the impact of the story.

But I don't think I was seeing the whole meaning of that story. Compassion literally means "suffering with," and I *thought* those Good Friday services were telling me that I was supposed to walk *with Jesus*, even suffer with Jesus. I now believe I was getting the message of the day exactly backward. Now I understand a different message, *that he chooses to walk with me*.

Years after those childhood services, a different priest pointed out to me that we read John's story of Jesus's passion on Good Friday precisely



because this telling deemphasizes Jesus's suffering. It focuses instead on his compassion for others, for the world, for us. He carries his cross himself. It is not too heavy for him, and he does not stumble. When he is thirsty, he asks for something to drink. When he sees his mother and his beloved disciple, he tells them to care for one another. And when his time has come, he declares his work finished and bows his head.

There is no cry of pain or betrayal in John's passion story—just the King of Love reigning from the cross, showing us God's ultimate compassion and limitless willingness to give.

It's true that throughout his life, and throughout our lives, Jesus asks us to follow him in his way of love. But I humbly submit to you that today is a day to simply let the drama wash over us. There's nothing we need to do or say or feel.

Today is the day when Jesus finishes his work of revealing to us God's love and compassion.

Holy Saturday

April 8, 2023

Close to the Heart

Jan Kwiatkowski

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.
—Luke 24:1 (NIV)

Holding my three-month-old grandson close to my heart on the day we buried my mother, I spoke with the Catholic priest who was to officiate at her service. He had an unexpected conflict after the funeral mass, and we agreed I would lead the graveside burial service for her. My prayer book was always in the car in case of pastoral emergencies. The funeral directors found me a lovely pine branch and a dish to hold the water I would bless for us to use to bless the casket that held my mother's body before it was lowered and covered with dirt.

I cannot begin to describe how much it meant to preside over her burial, to be able to bury my mother while surrounded by the people who loved her most. Afterwards, I stayed at her graveside. I'm one of those who needs to stand present and see hard things through to the end. I needed to see the casket lowered into the grave and the men cover it with the hard clay soil. My sister, sister-in-law, and several nieces saw me standing there and came back to stand with me, to bear witness.

I'm tearing up as I write this. We'd been through a lot in the preceding few months leading up to this moment. Important women standing with me on that difficult day was an indescribably important act of loving compassion. I needed them to be with me as much as they must have needed to come back and stand with me.

I'll often talk with clients who speak the Christian language about how we live out Holy Week many times in our lives. The Holy Week story provides a way for us to think, pray, and act through difficult times in our lives. The story helps us to understand that not only do we experience physical deaths with the promise of resurrection, we also experience

countless ways we die to ourselves and experience resurrection before we die. For example, when we leave a job or relationship and over time find renewed hope and contentment; move to a strange city and learn to make it home; set boundaries when we, or those we love, experience abuse and recover our sense of well-being; and the healing we experience when we make needed amends. What might be some examples of this in your own life?

We now approach the end of our shared journey of what it means to practice compassion with all our hearts, souls, strength, and mind. Our lives, and the world around us, will always provide opportunities to stand compassionately with others while allowing others to stand with us. If you need inspiration for continuing your practice of compassion, I invite you to hold the image of the women at the tomb close to your heart, at least as close as I held my grandson. Perhaps closer.

Easter Sunday

April 9, 2023

From Everlasting to Everlasting

The steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.
—Psalm 103:17

On this glorious day of resurrection and profound thanksgiving for the gifts we have received on our shared journey, how can we continue to be instruments of compassion as we share the gift of God's Easter love? How can we help to lessen the amount of suffering in the world?

We now know that *suffering with* doesn't mean we take on another's suffering. It means we connect with it and with the other because we have known it ourselves. We feel with them deeply, and then we do what we can to be a conduit of God's compassionate healing love. While it can seem overwhelming to know where to begin, perhaps the best place to begin is exactly where we are, as we are. We begin in this moment, this day, to pause, to breathe, to be present, to notice, to welcome, and then to turn to God, who hears all cries for help. We open ourselves to receive the gift of God's healing compassion and love, knowing we are never alone.

Now that we know that practicing compassion is always a choice, we continue to cultivate the practice of compassion one choice at a time. It is a daily decision and a commitment to return to our intention to open our entire being to God—not in denial or sublimation of our suffering, but with a faith in the deeper mystery and promise of God's infinite love and faithfulness. Choosing compassion will yield spiritual fruit, offering us emotional and spiritual sustenance in times of grief, upheaval, and uncertainty.

We practice by being present to the movement of the Spirit, to be directly and trustingly present, with ourselves, with others, and with God. It is in the present moment that we are free to listen for our inner life in God. This listening helps us to hear more clearly God's prayer and hope for us, so that our prayer can join God's prayer for us, for others, and for the world.



We realize that our well-being is intimately connected with another's well-being, and their well-being is intimately connected with ours. With this awareness that we are all interconnected, we practice compassion until it grows strong enough to be a natural response in the presence of suffering, despair, and great joy, our own, and others. This is how we will know that we are all connected and held in the love of God.

On this glorious day, may we continue our practice, not from a feeling that we need to change, but from a desire to love others and to be compassionate, as God has been so loving and compassionate to us. May we rest in the unending, loyal, unconditional, immeasurable, unbroken, whole-hearted love of God.

> *The mystery will not be solved, the power of the mystery will not be denied, for the transcendent presence of the holy surrounds us, will always surround us, and the greatness of the Spirit will endure forever. Be not afraid or anxious. The threshold on which you stand is the mystery of an infinite love, and an intimate love, a love that beckons you into its peace, that welcomes you with a limitless compassion. Be not afraid or anxious. Close your eyes. Open your heart. And you will know what I mean.*
>
> —Steven Charleston

It has been our joy to walk with you through this holy season of Lent to our joyous celebration of Easter!

Robbin, Jan & Scott

Notes/Reflections

Scripture, Quotes, Prayers & Practices for Lent

Scripture*

But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them.

—Nehemiah 9:17

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

—from Psalm 23

Remember, O Lord, Your tender mercies and Your lovingkindnesses,
For they are from of old.

—Psalm 25:6

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

—Matthew 5:7

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.'"

—Mark 12:30-31

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* *These Scripture are in addition to the ones used in the daily reflections.*

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

—Romans 12:12,15

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Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.

—2 Cor. 1:3-4

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The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,

—Galatians 5:22

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Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

—Ephesians 4:2 (NIV)

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Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

—Hebrews 11:1

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Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

—Hebrews 4:16

Quotes*

I think there are many thresholds in faith that we cross. They are the road markers on our journey to a deeper wisdom. We may not realize exactly when our understanding shifted, but looking back, we can see the change. One of these benchmarks is courageous compassion. Instead of carving up reality into who is "in" and who is "out," we seek to respect, understand and care for others, even if doing so is difficult or unpopular. In practicing courageous compassion we embody a spiritual truth: we are all created equal. No exceptions.

—Steven Charleston

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.

—From the *Charter for Compassion*

Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand.

—Isaac Penington, 1661

Let us remember the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Mt 7:12). This Rule points us in a clear direction. Let us treat others with the same passion and compassion with which we want to be treated. Let us seek for others the same possibilities which we seek for ourselves. Let us help others to grow, as we would like to be helped ourselves. In a word, if we want security, let us give security … if we want opportunities, let us provide opportunities. The yardstick we use for others will be the yardstick which time will use for us.

—Pope Francis in his 2015 address to Congress

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* *These quotes are in addition to the ones used in the daily reflections.*

Our task must be to free ourselves ... by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and it's beauty.

—Albert Einstein

In contemplation we move from communicating with God through speech to communing with God through the gaze of love. Words fall away, and the most palpable reality is being present to the lover of our souls. When we let go of all effort to speak or even to listen, simply becoming quiet before God, the Spirit is free to work its healing mysteries in us: releasing us from bondage, energizing new patterns of life, restoring our soul's beauty. Here we allow ourselves to be loved by God into wholeness.

—Majorie Thompson, *Soul Feast*

Jesus said to St. Faustina, I demand from you deeds of mercy, which are to arise out of love for Me. You are to show mercy to your neighbours always and everywhere. … I am giving you three ways of excersing mercy toward your neighbour: the first – by deed, the second – by word, the third – by prayer. In these three degrees is contained the fullness of mercy.

—St. Faustina, Diary 742

Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive.

—Dalai Lama XIV

The secret of Christian contemplation is that it faces us with Jesus Christ toward our suffering world in loving service and just action.

—Catherine of Siena

It is a lack of love for ourselves that inhibits our compassion toward others. If we make friends with ourselves, then there is no obstacle to opening our hearts and minds to others.

—Anonymous



When we focus on ourselves, our world contracts as our problems and preoccupations loom large. But when we focus on others, our world expands. Our own problems drift to the periphery of the mind and so seem smaller, and we increase our capacity for connection—or compassionate action.

—Daniel Goleman

Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity.

—Pema Chödrön

Our sorrows and wounds are healed only when we touch them with compassion.

—Jack Kornfield

Nurture the love within you so that it begins with the few for whom you care and then matures to overflow in compassion for every life you see.

—Steven Charleston

In compassion, when we feel with the other, we dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and we put another person there.

—Karen Armstrong

Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

—Teresa of Avila

Mercy is the absolutely indispensable lintel over which you step into the heart of God. Without a living active experience of mercy, both giving and receiving, you never meet the heart of God, because it's only there that the heart is to be found.

—Cynthia Bourgeault

Prayers*

Take my life and use it for your work,
May my soul be a home for the homeless
My heart a sanctuary of mercy
My actions the measure of devotion

—Beverly Lanzetta

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him forever in the next. Amen.

—Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Serenity Prayer*

Compassionate God, support and strengthen all those who reach out in love, concern, and prayer for the sick and distressed. In their acts of compassion, may they know that they are your instruments. In their concerns and fears may they know your peace. In their prayer may they know your steadfast love. May they not grow weary or faint-hearted, for your mercy' sake. Amen.

—Book of Common Prayer

O God, our times are in your hand. In the midst of uncertainty lead us by your never-failing grace as we seek to be agents of healing, hope and care. Walk with us through difficult times; watch over us in danger; and give to us a spirit of compassion for all who suffer and mourn. And finally, remind us that you have promised never to leave us, so that even in the valley of the shadow of death your love may be felt, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

—Lyndon Harris

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* *These prayers are in addition to the ones used in the daily reflections.*



Let me stand to bear witness to you, Spirit of life, for you are my rock and my inspiration. You are all around me in the beauty of your creation, in the brightness of morning and in the evening light, constant and unchanging, but forever new and surprising. You are my wisdom and my understanding, my vision and my determination, sustaining my soul through every season. You are the living sign of justice, the source of compassion, the ground of mercy on which I rely. Your love is an endless stream, nourishing all the Earth in ways I cannot count. You are my lifetime, my heart and my hope, the inheritance from my ancestors, the strength that sustains me and the tenderness that embraces me when I close my eyes to rest in your timeless grace.

—Steven Charleston

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me show love,
Where there is injury, pardon
Where there is doubt, faith,
Where there is despair, hope,
Where there is darkness, light,
Where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console
Not so much to be understood as to understand
Not so much to be loved, as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
It is in dying that we awake to eternal life. [Amen.]

—St. Francis of Assisi

Merciful Jesus, you are my guide, the joy of my heart, the author of my hope, and the object of my love. I come seeking refreshment and peace. Show me your mercy, relieve my fears and anxieties, and grant me a quiet mind and an expectant heart, that by the assurance of your presence I may learn to abide in you, who is my Lord and my God. Amen.

—Saint Teresa of Avila

Spiritual Prayer Practices

Receive & Release Prayer Practice

This prayer practice focuses on two words: *receive* and *release*. Here are some simple instructions for getting started.

- First, find a comfortable sitting position and begin to take deep, slow breaths. After you have relaxed and settled into the gentle rhythm of your breathing, begin to say the word *receive* silently in your mind each time you inhale, and the word *release* as you exhale. So, it's *receive* as you inhale, and *release* as you exhale. These two words will also help to focus your mind whenever it begins to wander.
- As you repeat the word *receive*, imagine yourself receiving what God has to offer you and wants to give to you right now.
- As you repeat the word *release*, imagine yourself releasing to God what it is you need to let go of at this time.
- Start by doing this practice for three to five minutes (it can be helpful to set a quiet timer at the beginning).
- If you have a particular prayer concern, you can use this practice to assist you in finding peace and guidance regarding your concern. Bring the concern to mind as you begin the *Receive & Release* practice. You may even find that you are given a different word or phrase that comes to mind to use in place of *receive* or *release*. You might, for example, find yourself mindfully repeating *patience, kindness,* or *forgiveness* on your in-breath and perhaps something like *control, anger,* or *judgment* on the out-breath.

Examen Prayer Practice

A way of paying attention as we listen for God. The Daily Examen is an ancient and powerful way of reflecting on the day so that we can more clearly identify how and where God has shown up in our lives and where God may be guiding us. Following is a brief description of the practice.

At the end of the day, sit quietly for a few minutes, seeking God's presence.

Then:

- Remember times in the day when you felt most alive, and thank God for those moments.
- Remember instances when you felt the least grateful, and offer those with thanks to God.



- Notice times in the day when you experienced being aligned with God's purpose for you, and give thanks for those times.
- Notice any moments when you felt far from living out God's purpose for your life, and offer those to God.
- Ask God to help you live ever more closely to God's plan and purpose for you tomorrow, and then turn everything over to God to hold while you rest.

—For more resources, a good place to start is the Ignatian Spirituality's website: bit.ly/38De8gc

Loving-Kindness Prayer Practice

May you be happy.

May you be healthy.

May you be safe.

May you live with ease.

The first time you say this prayer, use *I* for yourself: *May I be happy.* … etc. Then think of those you love. As you repeat the prayer, you may want to bring in those you find challenging to love right now, and those you have never met.

Tonglen

The prayer practice of Tonglen is a way to offer compassion and mercy through the breath. The suffering we welcome as we breathe in is transformed as we exhale by God's healing love, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. As Cynthia Bourgeault reminds us when we practice Tonglen: "Remember that it isn't us, or our story, that is offering healing, but rather through us. It's not us doing anything but breathing. We are to simply let all the work of breathing in and out with any intention fall away, and simply breathe." Here is one way to practice. After centering and grounding ourselves through the breath, as we inhale, we welcome the awareness of suffering, ours or another. On the outbreath, we breathe out compassion, mercy, and God's healing love.

Welcoming Prayer Practice

When used consistently, this prayer practice has the capacity to quickly and effectively dislodge us from our habitual reactions, emotional patterns, and limiting comfort zones. Using it can help move us through challenging or painful experiences, times of disturbed emotion or anguish, and even moments where unhelpful control tendencies and self-inflation takes us over.

Three steps for the Welcoming Prayer Practice:

1. **Focus or "sink in"** to become aware and physically present to the particular experience or upset without analyzing or judging yourself or the situation. Don't try to change anything at this stage—just stay present.
2. **Welcome and lightly name the response** that is being triggered by the difficult situation, such as *fear*, or *anger*, or *pain*. Acknowledge the response as sensation, and recognize that in this moment, if the experience is not being rejected or repressed, it can be endured. Ever so gently, begin to say "welcome," such as "welcome fear," "welcome resentment," etc. Though this step is counter-intuitive and the impulse is most likely to try to push away the unpleasant emotion, Cynthia Bourgeault explains: "By welcoming it instead, you create an atmosphere of inner hospitality. By embracing the thing you once defended yourself against or ran from, you are actually disarming it, removing its power to hurt you or chase you back into your smaller self."
3. **Transition to a "letting go,"** whereby the intensity of the situation can recede. This enables the natural fluidity of sensation to come and then go.

—For more on the Welcome Prayer/Practice, go to: https://bit.ly/2Sqtj0R

Centering Prayer Practice

A way to sit with God without using language. It is to consent to the Divine Presence within. Dwelling in God who dwells in us. The present moment is where we meet God and where we have an opportunity to enter more deeply into the mystery of God's love.

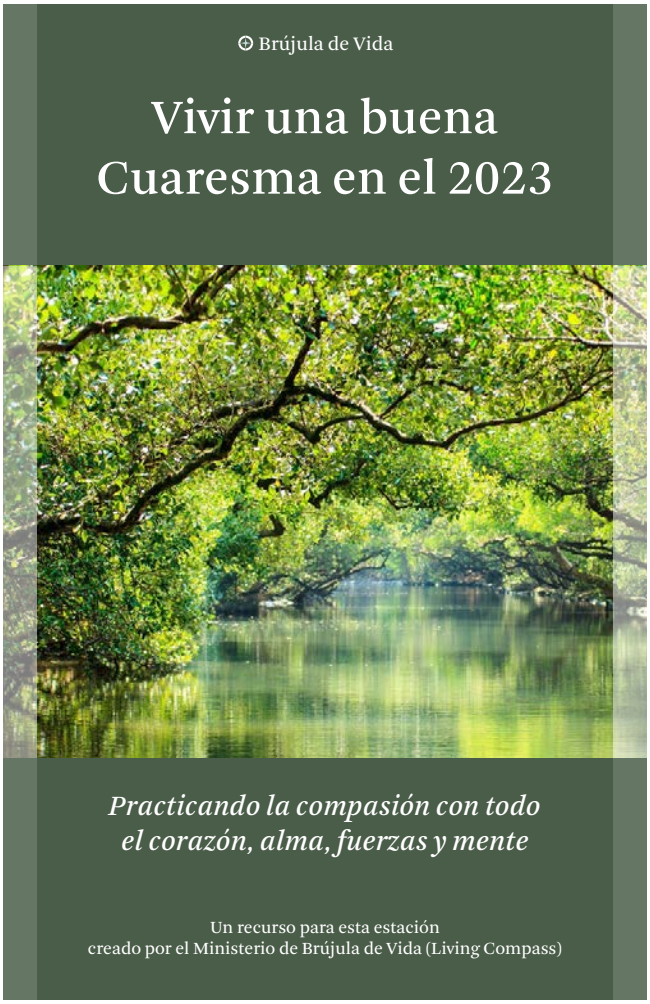
The Four Guidelines *(from Thomas Keating, Contemplative Outreach):*

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. (You can pray for God to give you an image/word that is just what you need at this time.)
2. Sit comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and then silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. When engaged with your thoughts,* return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

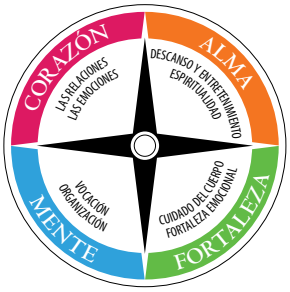
* thoughts include body sensations, feelings, images, and reflections

Notes/Reflections

Notes/Reflections



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