

To Be an Agent of Compassion

- a sermon compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, February 5, 2017

Reading

“Charter for Compassion”

- Council of Conscience, Switzerland, 2009

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women people

- to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion
- to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate
- to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures
- to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity
- to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

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.

Sermon Reflection

"I say that religion isn't about believing things. It's about what you do. **It's ethical alchemy.** It's about behaving in a way that changes you, that gives you intimations of holiness and sacredness."

- Karen Armstrong on Powells.com

The Charter for Compassion we just heard presented so beautifully by Tom (Moffit) is the result of the 2008 TED prize awarded to religion scholar Karen Armstrong. The monetary prize was \$200,000.00 plus the instruction to use the funds to make the world a better place. Armstrong's wish was to ask the world to help her assemble a "Charter for Compassion," a document around which religious leaders could work together for peace. In late fall 2008, the first draft of the document was written by the world, via a sharing website.

In February 2009 the words of the world were collected and given to the "Council of Conscience," a gathering of religious leaders and thinkers, who together crafted the final document we just heard.

Let's think on this moment...the woman is awarded a boat-load of money to make the world a better place. She is a renowned religious scholar, a former nun, "a powerful voice for ecumenical understanding" who has devoted her life to the study of the world's major religions – has written more than twenty books on faith and religion – and the one thing she zeroes in on as the hope for the betterment of the world...is compassion. It appears there really is something fundamental in this Golden Rule, "do unto others" (reference to children's story presented earlier) thing...

So let's look at compassion. Douglas Taylor cites in a 2011 sermon reflection on Armstrong's work (and I have used a good portion of Taylor's reflection in what follows) that "Compassion derives from the Latin *patiri* and the Greek *pathein*, meaning 'to suffer, undergo, or experience.' So 'compassion' means 'to endure [something] with another person,' 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." (Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life by Karen Armstrong, p 9)

Compassion is to endure with, to suffer with, to experience with another person. And this will lead us to behave in certain ways toward each other. A Buddhism text puts it this way – compassion is to ask oneself: "...a state that is not pleasing or delightful to me, how could I inflict that upon another?" (Samyutta Nikaya v. 353) Greek philosopher Socrates said "Do not do to others that which would anger you if others did it to you." All the world's religions offer this message. All the great philosophers wrestle with a way to name this deep truth. Compassion is the heart of the Golden Rule and the base of any serious ethic.

Evidence from scientific research points to compassion being a deep aspect our humanness. We are predisposed to being compassionate. Now, there is of course a wealth of data to the contrary saying that humans are self-focused first, that **we are inescapably selfish**. [...] And it is certainly true that the most basic part of our thinking, what happens in our “reptilian brain” – the oldest, most instinctive part of our brain - is indeed the model of selfishness. [...] But of course the reptilian brain is interested in only the most basic life needs. That’s its job. Yet we have art and a yearning for beauty and goodness. There is more to the human brain than the drives of self-interest. If you see someone else burn her hand, if you notice a child about to fall off a wall, if you see a car careening toward a stranger, you react. It is instinctive. The urge to reach out is in your gut, it’s visceral. Neurobiologists are studying what they call “**Mirror Neurons**” located in the frontal cortex that light up in such scenarios. Humans have a natural capacity for compassion. A Confucian philosopher from over two thousand years ago named Mencius (c. 371 – c. 289) argued that one could lose the natural capacity for compassion and sympathy in the same way one could lose the natural capacity to walk or speak. Likewise, one could exercise that aspect in oneself to full development as one might exercise one’s memory or one’s muscles.

Thus we are truly born with an innate capacity for compassion and for selfish cruelty. From an evolutionary perspective one is superior as it is biologically located in the more advanced areas of the brain. And philosophers and prophets have been saying this for millennia. What these neuroscientists are discovering is what religious sages have been calling the Golden Rule. [...] “The first person to formulate the Golden Rule, as far as we know, was the Chinese sage Confucius (551-479 BCE) [over 2.5 thousand years ago] who when asked which of his teachings his disciples could practice “all day and every day” replied: [...] Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you.’ [Analects 15:23] This, he said, was the thread that ran right through the spiritual method he called the Way (dao) and pulled all its teachings together.” (Ibid p9)

And all this fits into our own Unitarian Universalist theology as well when we speak of the Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person. We acknowledge that everyone has the capacity to choose either good or evil actions, but at an innate level we are loved and loving. **The evidence of humanity’s evil and cruelty does not negate our capacity to be compassionate.**

All the world’s religions make clear that compassion is at the heart of how one is to live faithfully. Yet time and again those same world religions are cited as the reason for wars and violence. These two statements seem to contradict each other. Religion is either about violence or about compassion, which is it? **Let me say unequivocally: all the major world religions are about compassion and the misuse of any of them to advocate violence is a perversion we bring to it ourselves.** War and violence are caused by greed, egotism, pride, fear, and a lust for power and control. We spray a

perfume of sanctity and religiosity over such unhealthy drives within us to pretty them up. But in so doing, we misuse and abuse the true nature of our religions.

Karen Armstrong, whom I mentioned earlier, has a book out on the topic of Compassion that is a companion to the Charter for Compassion she helped create. This book, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, is a deliberately titled book. She meant it to be heard as a link to the Alcoholics Anonymous 12 step program. She was intending to make the point that we are normally compassionate people – that compassion is a basic state for us but we are addicted to egotism. We get a high, she argues, from our pet hatreds. We get a self-righteous rush from our own clever displays of triumph over an annoying store clerk or a rude colleague. We are addicted to the opposite of compassion. We are drawn to behave in the reptilian brain ways because there is a bigger buzz to being right than there is to being kind.

And so, Armstrong wrote this book as a tool to help people to choose to be more compassionate. It is a lifetime's work – not unlike being sober. Armstrong includes steps such as "Learn about compassion" and "look at your own world" early in the 12 steps. "Concern of everybody" and "Love your enemies" are found near the end. When she was invited to speak to the gathered Unitarian Universalist general assembly delegates this past summer as our distinguished Ware Lecturer, she focused on the seventh step which she titled "How little we know." How little indeed...

I would like to spend a little time today in her third step: Compassion for Yourself. There is a tendency we have to project our own shadows onto others. **All of the cruelty, depravity and violence we have simmering around in our own psyches unacknowledged is fodder for what bothers us most in other people. All of us have less savory drives and desires, and left unexamined or unacknowledged these shadow inclinations color the world we see – and I will then see in others what I refuse to see within myself.**

So, the solution is to acknowledge my depraved and vile urges? No. It's harder than that. **The path to a compassionate life is to have compassion for myself in the face of my shadows.** Often I am harder on myself than I would ever be to another person. I make a list of all the terrible things about myself and I acknowledge the ways I am depraved, the ugliness I hide from others, my capacity to be cruel – even listing examples from the past. And then I dwell on it, I feed this list of inadequacies to myself regularly, and slowly poison myself on my own failings. Simply acknowledging them is not enough.

My anger, fear, and selfishness are all there within me, a part of me. And when I can acknowledge it all – but not be consumed by it or defined by it – then I can have compassion for that in myself ... and in others. By having compassion for myself, I see all that I can do to offer compassion to others.

Karen Armstrong tells a very good story to illustrate this point.

“The late rabbi Albert Friedlander once impressed upon me the importance of the biblical commandment “Love your neighbor as yourself.” I had always concentrated on the first part of that injunction, [Armstrong tells us] but Albert taught me that if you cannot love yourself, you cannot love other people either. He had grown up in Nazi Germany, and as a child was bewildered and distressed by the vicious anti-Semitic propaganda that assailed him on all sides. One night, when he was about eight years old, he deliberately lay awake and made a list of all his good qualities. He told himself firmly that he was not what the Nazis said, that he had talents and special gifts of heart and mind, which he enumerated to himself one by one. Finally, he vowed that if he survived, he would use those qualities to build a better world. This was an extraordinary insight for a child in such circumstances. Albert was one of the kindest people I have ever met; he was almost pathologically gentle and must have brought help and counsel to thousands. But he always said that he could have done no good at all unless he had learned, at that terrible moment of history, to love himself.” (Ibid, p75-6)

To be an agent of compassion in the world you must first have compassion for yourself. Rabbi Albert Friedlander did not say he learned, in the face of oppression, to love humanity or his oppressors, or even just his fellow Jews more deeply. No, he said he learned to love himself. **The rest flows from that.** Compassion is rooted in the individual experience; it starts with loving yourself. Islamic texts say, “None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.” (Number 13 of Imam “Al-Nawawi’s Forty Hadiths.”)

[...]

Let me offer you as I close a brief story Karen Armstrong shared when she spoke to the Unitarian Universalists in 2011:

“There’s a Sufi philosopher, Ibn Arabi, in the 12th, 13th century—great, important Sufi Sheikh. And he says that every single human being that has been born into the world, whatever his or her religion, is a unique and unrepeatable revelation of God to the world. Every single human being is an incarnation of one of God’s hidden names.

“In a sense, this is an exercise to help you realize the utter indescribability and mystery of God. If you just think of all the people in this room and that each of us expresses one individual aspect of God, you see how impossible it is to sum up God. **Our task is to look beneath the frequently unpromising exterior to that sacredness.**”

<http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2011/184434.shtml>

We are living in a remarkable age. We are on the edge in so many ways. But I tell you this: we can participate in the movement of our human venture forward though compassion rather than remaining in the rut of selfish, self-defeating greed and ego. Compassion is a dynamic force of clarity and illumination in our polarized world. Compassion can break through the dogmatic and ideological boundaries we have built up around ourselves.

Compassion is that essential bridge of human relatedness that we need to employ to become a full humanity together.

Shalom and Salaam, Blessed be and Amen.

Closing Words

Even
After
All this time
The sun never says to the earth,
“You owe
Me.”
Look
What happens
With a love like that,
It lights the
Whole
Sky.
~Hafiz, 14th century Sufi poet

May we wake each day with the mission to generate love in this world as humbly and faithfully as the sun generates light. May we trust that we can lean on each other for comfort when the struggle is relentless. May we know in the bones of our bones that we are not alone. May this knowledge give us the courage to shine the light of compassion on everyone. No exceptions.

- Rev Deanna Vandiver

Sources

Douglas Taylor “A Charter of Compassion” 11-6-2011
<http://uubinghamton.org/2011/11/a-charter-of-compassion/>

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Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life by Karen Armstrong, 2010.