

A time for Compassion

Sermon by Brigitte Bechtold

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Empathy, compassion, altruism, kindness, forgiveness. These are good practices in a community, because they help social interaction, which we humans need to survive. Evolutionary biologists, psychologists and anthropologists agree that empathy and compassion are essentially hardwired in us. They are part of survival techniques that developed beginning with the so-called cognitive revolution 70 thousand years ago.

Empathy refers more generally to our ability to take the perspective of and feel the emotions of another person or another being. Compassionate empathy, or compassion, is feeling someone's emotion or pain and, if possible, doing something to help.

Most of us can remember events in our childhood when we were overcome by such feelings and acted on them. When I was a child, after a heavy rain, I used to pick up worms from the drying pavement and place them in the wet grass so they could go back into the ground.

This experience reminds me of the children's story about the starfish, which has many versions, beginning with a true story written by Loren Eiseley in 1969. In a recent children's book, it goes like this: A young girl was walking along a beach where numerous starfish had washed up during a storm. When she came to a starfish, she would pick it up, and throw it back into the water. She had been doing this for some time when a man approached her and said, "Little girl, why are you doing this? You can't save all these starfish. You can't even begin to make a difference!" The girl stopped and thought about this. But after a few moments, she bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it as far as she could into the sea. Then she looked up at the man and replied, "Well, I made a difference for that one!" Now the man thought about what she had said. Inspired, he began throwing starfish back into the sea. Soon other people joined in and saved a large number.

To my knowledge, I have never inspired anyone to help throw worms back into the wet grass! So not all compassionate acts are contagious. But many are.

One may wonder if there is such a thing as too much empathy/compassion?

What happens to people who encounter the suffering of others throughout their workday? Such continuous, intense sharing of the pain of another may cause what is called "emphatic distress", and this could lead to a decrease in one's actual helping behavior. How to prevent burnout for such people? Psychologists have found that empathy training increases brain plasticity and leads to increased activation of the so-called Anterior Midcingulate Cortex in the brain, which is crucial for processing pain. Such training can increase resilience and coping by people in the helping professions: chaplains, nurses, counselors, and others.

Also, training to *increase* our capability to engage in compassion can take place in many ways. Buddhist disciples can become bodhisattvas and commit to a life of compassion for suffering beings. Compassion is and should continue to be taught in kindergartens, elementary and other schools. It can be taught with images or poetry. In one university class on rhetoric for example, students were shown the heart-wrenching photo of the little Polish boy who stood with his hands up, in a line with his mother and other Jewish people who

had been arrested and were about to be transported to a concentration camp. A Nazi soldier was training a gun on them. Students were asked to write a poem about their feelings. Most addressed their poetry to the little boy and, understandably had nothing good to say about the Nazi soldier in the photo.

This is a good place to talk about Compassion for bad people and compassion by bad people

In the rhetorical exercise I just mentioned, some students addressed their poems to the Nazis in the picture, but none showed compassion for them. Rather, they tried to elicit compassion from them. To me, the most striking example of compassion for “bad” people is that of the Tibetan Buddhist monk Palden Gyatso, who was a political prisoner of the Chinese government for 33 years. He was beaten, shocked with electric cattle prods, suspended from the ceiling over a burning fire, starved, and forced to do slave labor. He was released in 1992 and when asked what scared him the most in prison, he replied that his biggest fear was losing compassion for his torturers. Indeed, what would he be left with? Only hatred, which would have truly consumed him.

Are Bad people capable of compassion?

A baby smiles back when seeing its mother smile. That’s the most basic level of compassion: emotional compassion. Some very bad people are capable of at least this kind of compassion. Sometimes they are inspired beyond this level. As many of you know, in 1989, five innocent black teenagers were convicted of a violent assault and rape in Central Park in New York, without any evidence whatsoever pointing to them. Korey Wise was tried as an adult and was sentenced to 15 years. He was treated brutally in prison, was often beaten up, but decided that he would become a model prisoner, survive and serve out his prison term. Parole was not an option: he stopped attending his parole hearings because the parole board insisted that he had to admit his crime before the hearing could proceed. When he had served 13 years, another prisoner walked up to him—a man who had been in a fight with him before—and Korey thought: here we go again, another beating. But instead, that prisoner told him that he, Korey, was truly an inspiration to him. As it turns out, that prisoner was serving a life sentence for a series of brutal rapes, and he was the one who had committed the crime in Central Park. That man ended up confessing to it, and the DNA that had been gathered at the crime scene soon proved to be his. Long story short, the so-called Central Park Five were exonerated, and a lawsuit brought on their behalf yielded a settlement of more than \$40 million. Korey Wise contributed part of his settlement to the Innocence Project that assists those falsely accused of violent crimes. You may know that this initiative was started by Bryan Stevenson and many of us have read his book *Just Mercy*. Meanwhile, like Bryan Stevenson himself, Korey also has also become a sought-after motivational speaker.

Today, we sometimes see compassionate acts criticized or criminalized, and lack of compassion tolerated:

After Amber Guyger was sentenced to ten years in prison in October of this year, for killing a black man Bothan Jean in his own apartment, the victim’s brother asked the judge for permission to approach her and proceeded to give her a hug, saying “I don’t even want you to go to jail. I want the best for you. Because I know that’s exactly what Bothan would want you to do.” His compassionate act and words were severely criticized in the media for his supposed forgiveness of Amber, which is not what it was. Some social media posts claimed that black folks are always too ready to forgive. It wasn’t exactly forgiveness. Leon Seltzer wrote in 2009: “If you are able to access the more benevolent, humane side of your being, and become truly compassionate about the suffering of those who caused you to suffer, you can begin—with humility—

to discharge your toxic feelings toward them, independent of forgiving them as such.” And let us not denigrate forgiveness itself. While some psychologists see it as condescension towards those who have wronged us, in African society, forgiveness of the kind Seltzer talks about, namely discharging toxic feelings toward perpetrators, often one’s own child or sibling, is an important way in which families and communities have overcome periods of genocide and forced child soldiering.

In other recent events, remember the woman who worked the lunch counter at a public school in New Hampshire and who gave a free lunch to a student who had no money on their account. She was fired. Remember the humanitarian aid worker who was tried in court twice for helping illegal immigrants with water and first aid. He was acquitted twice. And think about the climate of tolerating non-compassion when, just two days ago, a Guatemalan youngster was found dead in a federal detention center after lying for hours on the floor. Meanwhile, a Navy Seal who had posed with the body of a dead adversary gets to keep his trident after the president intervened in his court martial.

We can involve our children in pointing out acts of compassion and not let them be influenced only by negative stories. When they come home with tales about a lunch counter worker who was fired, we can take the opportunity to praise that worker’s compassionate act.

I titled this talk “A Time for Compassion,” because human compassion is needed more than ever today:

In our own society, health care access is deteriorating. The climate continues to warm and more and more people we call immigrants will have to find new places to live and flourish. AIDS continues to kill. The city of Amsterdam just revealed a statue that sheds a tear every 40 seconds, one for every new person dying of AIDS. That is a public act of emphatic compassion. At home, we must resist legislation that flies in the face of compassion: Border walls, retention centers, lack of public health care, reversal of environmental legislation. Those of us who can vote should do so in compassionate ways, and not only in federal elections but also those that have important local implications for access to clean air and water, education, and workers’ rights. Ballot proposals and candidates for office are often lacking in compassion, and it behooves us to keep this in mind. So: let us practice and amplify the compassionate acts and not emulate the non-compassionate ones. **Our lives literally depend on it.**

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