

**SERMON**  
**The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson**

**Mark 6:30**

*As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd and he had compassion for them,  
because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*

“He had compassion.” The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions calling us to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. It is compassion that impels us to work to alleviate the suffering of others, and to honor the sanctity of every human being, treating everybody, without exception, with justice, equity and respect. Compassion is aptly summed up in the Golden Rule, which asks us to look into our own hearts, to discover what gives us pain, and then refuse, under any circumstance, to inflict that pain on anybody else. But, there seems to be a catch—not everybody seems to be willing or capable of being compassionate.

When I was a chaplain at Johns Hopkins Hospital, back in the 80s when the AIDS epidemic was at its height, I remember hearing about a colleague of mine from the patients I was visiting. They told me that there was a parish priest, a volunteer, who sat in the hospital waiting room every Friday and had been doing so for over a year. They all seemed to know him, though they didn’t even know his name. He was just there, in case anyone needed or wanted to talk with someone. This was back when HIV was still a mystery and was wreaking havoc on the gay community. That volunteer wasn’t afraid. Or, if he was, it didn’t matter. What mattered were all those young patients who were there alone and and frightened, ostracized and dying. He was there for and with them. “He had compassion for them,” because they were alone, “like sheep without a shepherd,” without anyone to be concerned for them.

It was AIDS, or the HIV epidemic that seems to have caught our attention, our focus, to the importance of the immune system. Now, everyone is talking about and doing research on how to boost the immune system as the natural defense that protects against disease. I don’t remember that focus before HIV made it clear. In the same way, it seems that there is a renewed interest in the importance of empathy and compassion because of our socio-political climate

these days as we watch the harsh treatment of immigrants and children, incidents involving the disregard of women and people of color, and the continuous outbreaks of violence, along with hate speech. Now we can see clearly the importance of empathy and compassion. Empathy and compassion. Can they heal the seemingly intractable problems of our time?

What does “compassion” actually mean? The word is often confused with “pity” and associated with an uncritical, sentimental benevolence. This perception of compassion is widespread.

But “compassion” does not mean feeling sorry of people. The word “compassion” is derived from the Latin and Greek meaning “to suffer, undergo, or experience.” “Compassion” means to endure something with another person, to put ourselves in somebody else’s shoes, to feel his/her pain as though it were our own, and to enter generously into his/her point of view. Conversely, we can train ourselves to avert our gaze from people who are hurting and to focus only on pleasant thoughts. Or, we can be empathetic to the suffering of others and reach out to them as best we can— to be with them.

I wonder, if there is an empathetic gene somewhere that makes it possible for some people to be compassionate and others not to be capable of it. Maybe empathy and compassion, the capacity to feel other people’s pain is hardwired in some and not in others. Empathy is when you feel what someone else feels. It is seeing the world from the perspective of another. It is grasping as fully as possible what someone else experiences. Empathy and compassion seem wrapped up with the capacity to recognize another person’s humanity or not to be able to this at all. Maybe, not everyone can do it. Maybe it is a gift and not a skill. I wonder.

This past week I was in Harlem having a lunch meeting with a musical composer I have been working with for over two years. We are working on the development of a musical play which involves not only a story line and plot but also the development of the characters. As a musical, the compositions are vehicles to “move the storyline along” and to help the audience see what is in the heart and mind of the character. Tariq and I have gotten stuck on one of the major characters. Without discovering and showing how that character changes, we have no successful plot. For about two hours over multiple cups of tea, we struggled to figure out what to do with

him. The problem is, that our character has been callous and blind to the suffering of the woman he claims to love. He shows no genuine empathy or compassion.

What are we Tariq and I to do to “save him.”

I said, “We have to break his heart. Then he will be able to feel another’s pain.” Tariq disagreed. “That’s not good enough. We’ve already done that and he’s just more concerned with his own feelings.” “Then, what are we to do to redeem him?,” I said. “The audience needs us to redeem him. No redemption. No show. No point to the story. And, besides, people want a happy ending.” After long conversation, we agreed that it is really not up to us to do the redeeming. It is God who redeems. Just like other forms of healing—a doctor can straighten something that is broken, or remove an obstacle that has wounded, or balance something that is amiss—but it God who does the actual knitting together, the healing. We are *made to heal*, if the conditions are right. So what are the conditions that will give our character the possibility of being redeemed? This is the crux of the matter. What are the right conditions? We agreed that our character has to be willing to let go of his control. Control is an impediment. It keeps him locked up inside himself. He suffers from an entrenched perspective, singular, therefore unbalanced. He is the obstacle. He gets in his own way. If we want him to be genuinely empathetic, capable of compassion, then redemption for him must mean his willingness to move into the future with the other person, not knowing what will happen. He will need to be *with* the other person, in this case, the person he claims to love, not knowing, or controlling the outcome, no matter what. Able to see the world through her eyes. He must take a risk. It requires courage.

Perhaps this isn’t the usual kind of happy ending for a musical show but it is a realistic ending. I trust audiences to be savvy enough to know and appreciate, the genuine, the truth when they see it. They, too, will have to let go, and trust the unknown final outcome of the musical’s characters. I’m not sure I know of a play where the outcome is left open and still satisfying. I think we’re on to something! Good luck to composer Tariq! We need a song that celebrates the unknowing, the uncertainties as redemption. That’s faith.

Today’s gospel lesson reminds us that empathy and compassion is an essential characteristic of Jesus’ life and teachings, and therefore the Church’s calling. The scene is an illustration of

Jesus's Golden Rule. "Do to others as you would have them do to you." It's not original with Jesus. We find the Golden Rule in all of the enduring religions of the world. Perhaps first in the philosophies of Confucius. Its universality reminds us that the truth is not limited to one tradition but that God is revealed through a number of different spiritual paths. The Jewish Rabbi Hillel, born a few decades before Jesus, was approached by a man who promised to convert to Judaism if the rabbi could recite the entire Torah while standing on one leg. Presented with this dilemma, the rabbi responded while standing on one leg, "What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man. That is the whole of the Torah. The rest is commentary." Jesus urges us to have empathy for others so that we will treat them as we want to be treated. He says simply, "Take the risk of being compassionate to others. And if you do, you open up new possibilities and you do wonders for your own soul."

According to religious historian Karen Armstrong, the word for compassion in Semitic languages is etymologically related to the word for "womb," evoking the mother's love for her child as an archetypal expression of our compassion. At its core, compassion is a response to the inevitable reality of our human condition, our experience of pain and sorrow which we all experience. Compassion offers the possibility of responding to suffering with understanding, patience and kindness rather than fear and repulsion.

Compassion is what connects the feeling of empathy to acts of kindness, generosity, and other expressions of our altruistic tendencies. Compassion is a readiness to help or wanting to do something ourselves about another person's situation. Here's the catch — If we understand our lives, if our own story tells us that we are social creatures endowed with instincts for compassion and kindness, and that we are deeply inter-dependent beings, our welfare is intertwined with one another, and we are willing to let that be, let that happen, then this changes the way we are and the way we behave in all our relationships. The stories we tell about ourselves matter, profoundly.

Perhaps because we are exposed to so much suffering, endless wars, famine, and the resulting world-wide migrations of people, because we witness the tears and the lack of empathy and compassion, we can not recognize just how important empathy and compassion are.

“Compassion’s time has come.” Perhaps empathy and compassion are society’s immune system at work. It’s time for people to see it and recognize just how important it is. As our world becomes smaller, more connected by the proximity of peoples, cultures and religions, we are called to foster the spirit of coexistence and cooperation through empathy and compassion.

The stage is now set for “Compassion” to make its entrance—the next big impact in our world. There is a growing scientific movement to redefine the place of compassion in our understanding of human nature and behavior. Educators are exploring ways to bring kindness and compassion into schools as part of our children’s social, emotional, and ethical development. Underlying this movement is the truth about the oneness of humankind —God’s vision — which is what compassion is all about. If the world’s believers reaffirm “compassion” as the foundation of their religious teachings, there would be a robust common ground —the condition—on which millions of people can come together to respect and help each other. “The Golden Rule” is the gift we have all been waiting for.

AMEN