"The Heart of Compassion"

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reading "Rest." by Richard Jones

It's so late I could cut my lights
and drive the next fifty miles
of empty interstate
by starlight,
flying along in a dream,
countryside alive with shapes and shadows,
but exit ramps lined
with eighteen wheelers
and truckers sleeping in their cabs
make me consider pulling into a rest stop
and closing my eyes. I've done it before,
parking next to a family sleeping in a Chevy,
mom and dad up front, three kids in the back,
the windows slightly misted by the sleepers' breath.
But instead of resting, I'd smoke a cigarette,
play the radio low, and keep watch over
the wayfarers in the car next to me,
a strange paternal concern
and compassion for their well being
rising up inside me.
This was before
I had children of my own,
and had felt the sharp edge of love
and anxiety whenever I tiptoed
into darkened rooms of sleep
to study the small, peaceful faces
of my beloved darlings. Now,
the fatherly feelings are so strong
the snoring truckers are lucky

I’m not standing on the running board,
tapping on the window,
asking, *Is everything okay?*

But it is. Everything’s fine.
The trucks are all together, sleeping
on the gravel shoulders of exit ramps,
and the crowded rest stop I’m driving by
is a perfect oasis in the moonlight.
The way I see it, I’ve got a second wind
and on the radio an all-night country station.
Nothing for me to do on this road
but drive and give thanks:
I’ll be home by dawn.

Sermon: “The Heart of Compassion”

“Misery loves company,” as the old saying goes.
But, I’m not so sure.

The traditional interpretation of this little proverb
is that miserable people want to spread the wealth around, so to speak;
that they want to bring other people down,
that they want to share their suffering, wallow in pain;
that they’re not content until everyone around them is miserable, too.

What a strange and unsettling notion!

I must admit that in all my years of life,
I don’t believe I’ve ever actually seen this phenomenon at play.

And I’ve spent plenty of time in the company of sad and suffering people.
I’ve seen anguish up-close and heard the lament of many a struggling soul.

But never have I witnessed someone craftily working
to make everyone else around them feel miserable, too.

Maybe you’re thinking that I’ve lived a charmed life.

Maybe you've been invited to more pity parties than I have.

But let me explain what I have seen.

When I have seen people in genuine misery,
I've found them longing for connection,
for understanding, for someone, if nothing else,
to bear witness to whatever it is that they're trying to endure.

More often than not, what I have heard is a crying out for compassion.

One of the archaic definitions of the word passion,
our theme for this month, is to suffer.

The word compassion, then, means to "suffer with."
To suffer and struggle alongside someone.
To show up. To be present.
To be aware. To be awake.
To be alive: to life's fragility and its pain.

I don't believe misery's love for company is some misplaced hope
that everyone become a bundle of pain and suffering in the end.

Instead, I believe misery loves the comfort of companionship.

In our times of despair, we want to be surrounded by people
who are willing and able to stand with us in the fire—
to see exactly how bad things might be,
and not turn aside or run away.

When sinking down, sinking down,
we long to know the wondrous love and friends
who pain and sorrow mend.

Those who bring the reassurance that we are not alone,
even if there's little or nothing that can be done to fix what is broken.

Now, it has to be said that no one can do this all the time—
at least this side of sainthood.

Any honest inventory of ourselves will likely return the evidence
that there have been plenty of times
when we couldn't get away from the fire quick enough,
when we not only tried to run away,
but ran for our lives, far and fast in the opposite direction.

As it turns out, compassion isn't so easy to come by.
It takes commitment and it takes practice.

It requires the ability to summon empathy,
the courage to open our hearts to the feelings of another
and recognise there, in all of that intensity,
something of our own experience.

To see in the suffering of someone else,
the very real possibility that such misery could be our own,
if it hasn't been already, many times over.

And that's what makes compassion such a challenge.

That we must be willing to feel
some of the struggle and the suffering
at the heart of the human condition;
that we must seek to identify in ourselves
the pattern or the potential of the pain that comes with life itself.

This being alive can be a bitter bargain.

Which is why it's often amazingly tempting to resist the call of compassion.

After all, we can be so easily enticed
To just look after our own well-being and hope for the best.
To ignore the vulnerability that comes with the very air that we breathe.
To pretend that we are immune to heartache and fear.
And to resist the obvious fact that, ultimately,
we are all in this beautiful and bittersweet dance together.

In her book *Traveling Mercies,*
Anne Lamott tells the story of Ken,

a man in her church who lives with AIDS.[1]

He “has a totally lopsided face, ravaged and emaciated,
but when he smiles,” she says, “he is radiant.”

She also tells the story of Ranola, a woman in the choir,
“who is large and beautiful and jovial and black and as devout as can be,”
and “who has been a little standoffish toward Ken.”

“She has always looked at him with confusion, when she looks at him at all.
Or she looks at him sideways,
as if she wouldn’t have to quite see him
if she didn’t look at him head on.”

“She was raised…by Baptists who taught her that his way of life—
that he— was an abomination. It is hard for her to break through this.”

Lamott says, “I think she and a few other women at church are,
on the most visceral level, a little afraid of catching the disease.”

“But Kenny has come to church almost every week for the last year
and won almost everyone over.
He finally missed a couple of Sundays when he got too weak,
and then a month ago he was back, weighing almost no pounds,
his face even more lopsided, as if he’d had a stroke.”

“So on this one particular Sunday, for the first hymn…,
we sang “Jacob’s Ladder,” which goes, ‘Every rung goes higher, higher,’
while ironically Kenny couldn’t even stand up.”

“But he sang away sitting down, with the hymnal in his lap.
And then when it came time for the second hymn, …
we were to sing ‘His Eye Is on the Sparrow.’”

The pianist was playing and the whole congregation had risen—
only Ken remained seated, holding the hymnal in his lap—
and we began to sing, ‘Why should I feel discouraged?
Why do the shadows fall?’
and Ranola watched Ken rather skeptically for a moment,

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[1] Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1999, 64-65.

and then her face began to melt and contort like his,
and she went to his side and bent down to lift him up—
lifted up this…rag doll, this scarecrow.
She held him next to her,
draped over and against her like a child while they sang.
And it pierced me."

That morning, "Ranola and Ken, of whom she was so afraid,
were trying to sing.…
Then both Ken and Ranola began to cry.
Tears were pouring down their faces,
and their noses were running like rivers,
but as she held him up, she suddenly lay her…
weeping face against his feverish…one,
put her face right up against his
and let all those… fluids [that had been so frightening] mingle with hers."

Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron says that,
"this kinship with the suffering of others,
this inability to continue to regard it from afar
is the discovery of our soft spot,
the discovery of [our] "noble or awakened heart."[2]

"We awaken…this tenderness for life," she says,
"when we can no longer shield ourselves
from the vulnerability of our condition,
from the basic fragility of [human] existence."

To feel another's pain—or their fear, or even their joy—
involves lowering what Tom Schade calls our "empathic wall,"
that great and reliable barrier we raise to protect ourselves.

The irony he points out is that
"we start out building the empathic wall
to make room for our precious tender selves to develop.
But eventually, …have to lower it in order for us to know ourselves at all.
What starts out as a protection," he warns, "ends up a prison."[3]

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[2] Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, 106-107.
[3] Tom Schade, "The Spiritual Practice of Compassion," 19 March 2001, First Unitarian Church, Worcester, Massachusetts.

This can be one of the hardest lessons for our hearts to learn.
That a heart can't truly be protected.
That they are only free when they are broken open.

And, yet, we spend so much energy trying to keep them from breaking,
encasing them with layers of a myth that says they can and should and must
be insulated from whatever might cause them pain.

While such an impulse is completely understandable,
it only keeps us from harm—and only for a time—
by cutting us off from the heartbeat of life
in all of its splendid and sometimes agonizing glory.

While we might feel like we're living,
it's debatable, in such a state, whether we're truly alive.

C.S. Lewis, the great Christian apologist,
knew all too well life's lessons of love and loss.

At the age of 58, Lewis married the love of his life,
a woman 17 years his junior named Joy Davidman.

Six months into their marriage Joy was diagnosed with bone cancer,
a disease that would define the four short years
they had together, as she was in and out
of treatment and remission and her cancer's return.

It was during this time that Lewis wrote his book, *The Four Loves*,
in which he explained what his heart had come to know:

> "To love at all is to be vulnerable.
> Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken.
> If you want to make sure of keeping it intact
> you must give it to no one, not even an animal.
> Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries;
> avoid all entanglements.
> Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness.
> But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change.
> It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable...

To love," he said, "is to be vulnerable."[4]

Compassion, love, and vulnerability, then,
are choices we make about how we will live in this world,
this world that if we are at all awake to it,
promises to not only break our hearts,
but, blessedly, to break them open.

Suffering—passion, if you will—
is the tool life seems to use most often to get the job done.

If life, as the Buddhists say, is suffering, let us make the most of it.

In saying this, in no way do I mean to venerate suffering.
Too many religions have done that already, and to devastating effect.

Rather, I hope you hear in my words the call to compassion
as a loving, heart-filled path to overcoming suffering in the world—
a call that is answered through the committed practice of empathy,
a willingness to feel another's pain by being vulnerable to our own.

A call that is answered by an abiding openness
to stand in someone else's shoes,
to know their struggle in your own bones,
and then respond from a desire to alleviate their suffering,
if by no other means than the simple gift of your presence.

This is a call to courage, a call to risk an open heart.

And it is an enduring hope, a sacred trust,
that the compassion we launch with love into the world,
might well return to sustain us in our own time of need.

May it be always so on this ever-spinning globe.

Amen.

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[4] C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 1960.