

“’Tis the Season 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.

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut,
in the center of the shopping district,

I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization
that I loved all these people.

That they were mine, and I theirs.

That we could not be alien to one another
even though we were total strangers.

It was like waking from a dream of separateness,
of self-isolation in a special world,
the world of renunciation and supposed holiness.”¹

This was the Trappist monk and peace activist
Thomas Merton.

He was writing in 1966, just a few years before he died unexpectedly
at age 53.

Like many wisdom teachers, he was realizing that
the spiritual life is not only about personal reflection
and practice, as important as they can be...

¹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Doubleday, 1966), 156-157.

But also about being out in the world,
in relationship with others.

For Merton, someone who had chosen to live apart
from the world in a monastery,
this came as a profound awakening.

He wrote that “this sense of liberation
from illusory difference
was such a joy and a relief that
I almost laughed out loud.”

He went on to say that he suddenly saw
“the secret beauty of [all people’s] hearts”...
the core of their reality that was untouched
by human failings.

“If only,” he wrote, “they could see themselves as they really
are...but there is no way of telling people that they are all walking
around shining like the sun.”

“If only,” he said, “we could see each other that way all the time.
There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no
more greed...”

I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and
worship each other.”

I don’t know whether Merton’s trip to the shopping district took
place during the holidays...

But perhaps his words may be helpful,
as we move through crowds
on subways and street corners,
hoping for a season of meaning.

The joy and relief he describes seems quite different than the jolly “fa-la-la-la-la” we hear on store speakers.

It’s the deeper joy of heart to heart, and soul to soul connection.

Of “feeling with.” Of compassion.

And compassion, I think, isn’t something you’d call “jolly,” exactly.

Yes, there is the joy of knowing we are interdependent... knowing we are part of a luminous web of being.

Yet there is the awareness, too, that we are, each of us, only one person...

And that our compassionate hearts will be open to as much sorrow, as they will be to joy.

§

More than 2,500 years ago, Siddhartha Gautama was also discovering the challenges of compassion.

Born into a wealthy family, he too awakened from “a dream of separateness” when he saw for the first time the suffering outside the palace walls.

He too went into the world.

He vowed to live a life of poverty, and searched for meaning for six years, before becoming enlightened through meditation, under a Bodhi Tree.

From that day on, he brought forward a message of wisdom, kindness, patience, generosity and compassion...

Providing a framework for ethical living that millions of Buddhists practice to this day.

We see here again, the importance of both contemplation and action...

Inwardness, quiet, solitude, separateness... alongside outer-world connection and activity.

In a season of compassion, perhaps we can intentionally make space for both:

Protecting the times of stillness, prayer and peace, in whatever form they take for us...

While knowing that we are connected always with people in the world who urgently need our care and action.

§

For many of us, in this age of hyper-connectivity, living with compassion can lead to feelings of anxiety and overwhelm.

Our social media feeds may be overflowing with stories about tragic world events, systemic injustice, and mounting concern over the earth's changing climate.

More and more studies are linking social media now with higher rates of anxiety and depression.

Many experts have identified the problem of “FOMA”—
fear of missing out—
as we compare our actual lives to the imagined lives of others.

But I believe that an additional,
and perhaps even more important cause of stress
is our continual exposure to the
increasingly complex and indeed existential
challenges now facing our world.

As we open ourselves to the awareness of suffering
on a global scale,

We may want to have more influence than we do.
We may want to do much more than we can.

We may wonder what difference we can make,
when the world’s needs are so enormous.

That’s why Amnesty International’s
method of identifying individual human rights cases,
and making it easy to write letters, as we can all do today,
is so powerful and effective.

As Jewish wisdom from The Talmud states:

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief.
Do justly now. Love mercy now.
[Move] humbly now.

You are not obligated to complete the work,
but neither are you free to abandon it.”

By offering each letter, one at a time,
we collectively make an enormous difference.

§

I'm reminded of a wisdom story in which a mouse reflects on the weight of a single snowflake.

Hearing his friend the dove say
that a snowflake weighs “nothing more than nothing,”
the mouse tells her:

“I was sitting on a branch of a fir tree the other day,
when it began to snow...

Not heavily,
not in a giant blizzard, no...
just like in a dream, with no violence at all.

Since I didn't have anything better to do,
I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs
and needles of the branch beside me.

Their number was exactly three million,
seven hundred and forty one thousand,
nine hundred and fifty two.

When the next snowflake dropped onto the branch—
nothing more than nothing, as you say—
the branch broke off.”

With that, the dove was taught a valuable
lesson about the importance of each
single voice for peace and justice.²

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² Adapted from a story by Kurt Kauter, in Jack Kornfield “*The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness and Peace*” (Bantam, 2004) 180-181.

We are each of us, always, called into connection...
out of our “dreams of separateness”...

Into the shining awareness that
each of us has within us, right here and now,
enough love to offer a world
that so urgently needs it.

The occasions do not have to be big and formal ones.

In fact, I think they're more powerful
when they're small and unexpected.

I was riding the subway once when
I noticed a very disheveled man
coming down the aisle clutching a newspaper.

He sat down beside someone
and seemed to have some kind of interaction...

I couldn't quite see what was going on,
but I assumed he was looking for a donation...
again, I couldn't quite see...

But then the man stood up
and made his way further down the car.

He saw an empty seat beside me and sat down.

Then he held up his newspaper in front of my face...
pointing at it urgently with a pencil.

I suddenly realized he was showing me a crossword puzzle,
and he wanted my help in solving it.

I happen to love crossword puzzles,
so I helped him fill in a few empty spaces
before I had to get off, at my stop.

As I apologetically got up to leave,
I noticed the woman across from us
watching with an anxious expression.

I wanted to tell her, “Please, continue the crossword puzzle. You
have the ability to do this!”

I wished she could see herself,
and the man holding the paper, “shining like the sun”
as Thomas Merton described each person in this world.

I wished she could fall down
and worship the experience of being connected in this way...

But I saw it was too far for her to go.

And I also had to get off at my stop.

In that, I identified with her, too...
painfully aware of the many times that I am unable to connect
compassionately with someone,

Because of my own anxiety, fatigue, busyness,
or sheer inability.

On the one hand,
none of us can extend kindness to everyone...but in the
interdependent web of life
no act of compassion is insignificant.

And sometimes the compassion
must be for ourselves...
accepting our limitations...
forgiving ourselves our mistakes...

And giving ourselves the gift of self-care
and kindness as often as we can this season...

Before we return again to the world, as it is,
with our hearts as open as they can be.

§

“Tis the season to be jolly...
Fa la la la la, la la la la.”

You know, when I chose the sermon title
“Tis the Season of Compassion”
it wasn’t really my intention to put down “Deck the Halls.”

We’ll be singing it here on an upcoming Sunday,
and we’ll be hearing it a lot,
if we’re anywhere near any store this season.

For all its jolly-ness and merriment, though,
it also contains the following line:

“Sing we joyous, all together,
heedless of the wind and weather.”

It strikes me this is really what a season
of compassion is all about:

Finding joy in our interconnection...
despite the storms we face, both together and alone.

Right now, it seems to me, we are not heedless,
we are heed-ful of the world's ills...

And perhaps at this time of year
more than any other.

Yet when we behold the flame of love
that shines within each of us...

We can find the peace
and compassion we long for...

And we can offer it, to a world that is waiting.

Amen.