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Rev. Jane Florence
“Heart of Compassion”
Luke 6: 27-28, 31-37



Some scriptures we read are ambiguous, some symbolic or metaphorical. Some scriptures need lots of theological unpacking- cultural explanations - historical references revealed. Some scriptures perplex and confuse. Some are subtle and veiled. Today's scripture is not any of those. What we hear today are straightforward imperatives: love your enemies; do to others what you want done to you; give freely; be merciful; do not judge. Period. That's it. No ifs, or buts, or exceptions. We can understand the lesson for today. There are no hard words or theological terms to unpack here. Ah but, we understand what it says, but how challenging it is to LIVE what it says. We might 'get it' in our heads, but do we 'get it' in our hearts.

We've all heard a lot about cholesterol. It's the fat that builds up in our arteries; this fat can become hardened, building up dams that block the blood flow into our hearts. You've seen how that happens on the commercials. We think blocked arteries happens to old people - or at least middle aged people. Now we've been warned about this hardening of the arteries developing even in children. We've been told to change our diets, get plenty of exercise, and may be a Lipitor or Crestor once a day will help keep our arteries from hardening. Millions of dollars of advertising and medications each year are targeted at combating hardening of the arteries.

The authors of sacred scripture didn't know about hardening of arteries, but they knew about hardening of the heart. They spoke of a hardened heart as one that no longer felt the pain of others. The Egyptian Pharaoh suffered from a hardened heart; he did not feel the pain of the Israelites oppression in slavery. The Jewish teachings cautioned against neglecting the poor, the widow and the orphans, the vulnerable in society, "thou shalt not harden thy heart to them." (Deut 15: 7). When our arteries are hardened, we risk death individually. When our hearts are hardened, we will surely die collectively.

"Captain G.M. Gilbert was the psychologist assigned to observe the German prisoners charged with war crimes at the Nuremberg trials. In his memoirs he writes: 'I told you once that I was searching for the nature of evil, and I now think that I have come close to defining it. A lack of empathy. It is the one characteristic that connects all the Nazi defendants, a genuine incapacity to feel with their fellow man. Evil, I think, is the absence of empathy.'" ¹

Certainly, we can point to mass genocide as indicating the absence of empathy, but the absence of empathy is more than instances of violent mass genocide.

When we are conditioned to see others as less than us, different from us, in some way not worthy of our compassion or even somehow deserving of their suffering, then our hearts are hardened, and no Lipitor will fix that. Unfortunately, we are taught to harden our hearts. We are taught slowly not to feel the pain of others. I grew up on the Texas-Mexico

¹ Allan J. Hamilton. "Neurons of Compassion" Spirituality & Health: The Soul/Body Connection. Sept/Oct 2009. p. 42-47.

border. The Rio Grande River cut a line between peoples. Those on the other side in the border town of Matamoros lived primarily in poverty. Children bathed in the brown water of the Rio Grande after it was polluted from run off all along its course; crippled men and women lay on sidewalks begging for sustenance. As a child, I was taught that's just the way it is- get used to it – don't worry about it. "Be thankful that you aren't one of them." When us gringos went across on a turista day to el Mercado, to buy trinkets or goods, I was taught to just step over the crippled people on the sidewalks; I was taught not to look them in the eye; pretend you don't see them and tune out their beggar cries, so they won't bother you. I was taught to harden my heart to their suffering because they were different than us. The difference was they were not Americans.

Lessons that harden our hearts are more than nationality or geographic lines. I also learned, "big girls don't cry" and "boys don't cry at all" Our culture conditions, it's silly to cry at the movies. We are conditioned to laugh when people fall down. We have a whole entertainment industry built on watching people hurt each other, emotionally and physically. We learn to get a tough skin, a thick skin, so others can't hurt us- and we can't feel their pain. Bit by bit, we are desensitized to our own pain and to one another's pains. We are taught to harden our hearts.

That's what our culture teaches; that's not what the religions of the world teach. Hardening of the heart can be combated just as hardening of the arteries. There's not a once daily pill to prevent it, but there is an exercise that will. Exercises of compassion can remove hardness of heart. All world religions are based on a notion of compassion. Compassion is the opposite of harder heart. Compassion means to share one another's suffering.

Buddha was reputedly asked by his secretary, "Would it be true to say that the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion is a part of our practice?" To which the Buddha replied, "No. It would not be true to say that the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion is part of our practice. It would be true to say that the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion is all of our practice." ²

One Jewish rabbi has put it this way: "Kindness gives to another. Compassion knows no other." ³ Compassion does not separate into Otherness.

In the Muslim tradition, foremost among God's attributes are mercy and compassion. Each of the 114 chapters of the Quran, with one exception, begins with the verse, "In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate". One of the practical purposes of fasting during the month of Ramadan is to help one empathize with the hunger pangs of those less fortunate, to enhance sensitivity to the suffering of others and develop compassion for the poor and destitute.⁴

Jesus taught those who would desire to follow in his way: must learn to love, to love even our enemies. We use the word love, but we think love is a feeling we are supposed to have. We think love is about all those red hearts we now see on the store shelves that replaced the Christmas stuff there last month. Jesus isn't talking about red and pink paper hearts here.

² Jack Kornfield. *Teachings of the Buddha*. Boston: Shambhala, 1996.

³ <http://www.religioustolerance.org/relcomp.htm>

⁴ <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/tawheed/conceptofgod.html> | University of Southern California

Jesus taught that love means to do good to those who hate us, to bless those who curse us, to do to others as we would have others do to us, regardless. Jesus taught that those who would follow his teachings would not judge others – would not condemn others – but would be merciful, forgiving, and giving, just as God is merciful. (Luke 6: 27-37)

Yes, what we Westerners know as the Golden Rule; do to others as you would have them do to you: is found in every world religion in one form or another. Those who have been enlightened know the path to the Divine is through compassion for others. It is a path of spiritual awakening, but we are learning there's more to it.

Scientists have found that when we watch someone, we can take on their experiences. We can feel their joy we can feel their pain. Scientists discovered that we have a neuronal architecture built into our brains to feel what another feels; we have a biological system designed for compassion. "In a very real sense, our brains are wired to keep us connected with what is happening to others around us, and to have that connection reverberate within us as our own experience." We are actually created to feel one another's joy and pain. When the researchers followed this discovery, they found that when we watch a needle inserted into someone else's arm, our brains neuron system presents the same pattern as the person actually feeling the discomfort. When we watch strong emotions in the movies, our brains trigger empathetic reactions. Our brain's pleasure center lights up when we perform altruistic acts.⁵ Unless we dull our compassion and kill our empathy, we feel with and for one another

God created us to be compassionate. Spiritually awakened teachers of all world religions teach us to open our hearts to the experiences of others, to feel the suffering which others' experiences, and to take whatever actions we can to relieve suffering in the world. Practices of compassion re-sensitize us and return us to the compassionate beings which God created us to be.

We hear a lot of talk about religious beliefs. What do Catholics believe? What do Methodists believe, What do Buddhists believe? What do Muslim's believe? Faith is not about assenting to an intellectual religious dogma; faith is about living compassionately. Thinking of religion as an intellectual belief system is a modern mindset. The purpose of religion is not to confirm our belief but to inform our living. Faith calls us – all- to actions of compassion.

That is what this church chose this last year. After much discussion, after study, after prayer, this church took a stance for compassion. You decided that despite conflict or repercussions, even in the midst of confused or mixed feelings, you decided for compassion for all people. You decided that people would not be discriminated against here for any reason including sexual orientation and gender identity. You decided to work for full inclusion of all persons in the United Methodist Church. You decided to be a people of compassion.

I heard a sermon this week. The preacher said that we are in pain, and if we let Jesus in our heart the pain will go away. I wanted to tap on the screen and say, 'yes, but...' If we open our heart to the presence of God, we will become *more* aware of the suffering around us. We will share in the pain of those living in poverty, abused by the system, incarcerated unjustly, and condemned for their sexual identity. We will share the pain of

⁵ Allan J. Hamilton. "Neurons of Compassion" Spirituality & Health: The Soul/Body Connection. Sept/Oct 2009. p.42-47.

those devastated in Puerto Rico and those thirsty in Sudan. We will suffer with the polar bear in the Arctic and the dolphins caught in tuna nets. We will recognize it is our own (carbon) footprint that is endangering our children's world. We will share in the pain as laws protecting our environment are repealed and truth in our government is denied.

But to take on the pain of others, only puts more pain in the world. Compassion is not to be in pain, but to reveal suffering without becoming trapped in it. Compassion is to mirror the pain without clinging to it. We might do well to learn the practice of *metta* - *metta* is a Pali word meaning "gentle" and "friend." Compassion is to befriend the suffering so it no longer controls. When we open our heart, we will feel the suffering of our neighbors, strangers, even our enemies and all of creation because we will learn to see the sacred within all. But feeling the suffering of others will not lead us into despair, nor paralyzed into apathy.

Metta is opening our hearts. It is the only way to love ourselves and our enemies. Let's try it: conjure up an image of yourself as a child knowing that this child still resides in you. Make peace with your inner child; say to that image

May you be free from fear
May you be free from compulsion
May you be blessed with love
May you be blessed with peace.

It may take several images and daily repetitions. Image you as a child, you as a teen, you as an adult. Daily freeing and blessing as you slowly moving to present day, when you can look in the mirror and change to I:

May I be free from fear
May I be free from compulsion
May I be blessed with love and peace

Then after many times of growing in inner peace, then may we turn to those who are our enemies, those who curse us, those who persecute us. Then may we envision them in our minds eye and offer these words of *metta loving kindness* to them.

May you be free from fear
May you be free from compulsion
May you be blessed with love
May you be blessed with peace.

Metta practice is spaciousness of heart that allows us to be at peace with reality. Only from a place of peace (not fear or rage) can we be agents of peace. In this way, we love our enemies. As we share and respond to the suffering in the world, as we practice compassion, our hearts will enlarge with Divine presence making home in us.

May it be so.