

## **COMPASSION, it is in us to give**

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, November 3, 2019)

### **INVITATION**

Friends, I want to invite you to take a moment to reflect over this past week. Think about what happened in the city, in the world. (Silence) Is there one overarching image that comes to mind? (Silence)

For me the image that comes to mind is the cringing emoji. In the city there was gun violence and the death of a compassionate youth worker, and globally a seven-year old was shot while trick-or-treating, there was the death al-Baghadadi, but also the continued efforts of youth to address climate change as wild fires ravage California, and the efforts of people to address racial discrimination. I wonder, how a single human race can be so divided, with people fervently racing toward each end of the spectrum – growing injustice and divisiveness on one end and justice and compassion on the other.

This past week I have thought much about the value of compassion and the state of the world. Living with compassion is perhaps one of the most powerful ways that we can enhance the well-being of all humanity. I have heard people such as the Dalai Lama suggest that compassion can be the healing force that can alter the direction of human history.

Biblical Scholar Karen Armstrong is one of the most provocative and original thinkers on the role of religion in the modern world, and a strong advocate for the power of compassion to change the world. What concerns her most deeply is how the golden rule, to love others is often so absent in the world. All religions and spiritual traditions uphold the value of compassion, yet it is these same religions that are so often in destructive conflict. I think that most people value compassion, yet we struggle to live it daily.

Recently I have been reading about brain activity and compassion. Dacher Keltner is the founding director of the Greater Good Science Center and a professor of psychology at the University of California. His field of interest is human nature and neurological function.

According to Keltner age-old assumptions have been made about human nature based on our history with its propensities toward violence, power, and corruption; assumptions such as that humans are selfish, greedy and destructive and that bad behavior is stronger than good behavior. Some religions have theologically rationalized and created belief systems that suggest that people are fundamentally evil and that human

emotions provoke sinful behavior and even that some people are inherently evil, bad and weak because of their colour, race, gender and sexuality.

Keltner suggests that, “human communities are only as healthy as our conceptions of human nature.” There is little wonder that our world is so unhealthy and that so many of our human affairs are corrupt when we assume that “selfishness, greed, and dishonesty lie at the core of human nature.” It takes little imagination to see how these damaging assumptions about certain groups of people have provoked fear of the other and supported bigotry, hatred, and violence.

I suggest that these negative assumptions about human nature have been used by governments and people to fuel their malicious actions. It is time for us to turn these harmful assumptions on their head, to disrupt and dismantle them just as Jesus did in his day so that we can nurture communities with healthy, positive paradigms of human nature. I think of Matthew Fox’s book *Original Blessing* that dismantled the concept of original sin.

In this modern world neuro-scientific studies are providing us with new insights that can help us to overturn these assumptions. They “argue persuasively for a different take on human nature,” rejecting the ideology that humans are fundamentally selfish, sinful, and bad. Our behavior may be sinful and bad, but our human nature is not.

In his article “The Compassionate Species” Keltner writes, “Charles Darwin was the beloved and engaged dad of a really rambunctious group of children. When one of his daughters died at the age 10, Darwin started to have these deep insights about the place of suffering and compassion in human experience” that he articulated in his book *The Descent of Man*. Darwin argued that sympathy is humanity’s strongest instinct, sometimes stronger than self-interest. Unfortunately, his insights were forgotten by evolutionary science because there appeared to be no evidence of an instinctual sympathy in a human race that showed itself to be so lacking in compassion.

Over the years, extensive research of the brain supplemented with experiments have provided clear evidence that humans have a compassionate or sympathy instinct, that the brain is wired for compassion. It is believed that this instinct evolved as a result of the adult/child relationship. Babies and children were weak, dependent and vulnerable and they needed to be protected in order to survive. Neuroscientists have discovered that some regions of our brain are stimulated not only by our own pain but by the pain, suffering and vulnerability of others.

What we are learning is that humans have great capacity to be compassionate and that human nature is not shaped for selfishness and self-interest. This research assures me that there is hope for this human race of ours.

While compassion may be rooted in our brains, sadly, this does not guarantee that we will act compassionately. Children who are never touched or loved and who are isolated do not know how to be compassionate because it is in the touching and the feeling of being love and cared for that our compassion instinct is activated. Compassion fosters compassionate behavior. Studies have shown that the Germans whose inspiring behavior helped rescue Jews during the holocaust occurred because they grew up in environments in which there was much compassion and altruism.

Spiritual teachers throughout the ages understood that compassion is not something we have to learn, but rather that it is a natural energy already within us that we must awaken before we can express it.

If we are not utilizing our compassion instinct, then we can lose our capacity to feel connected to the other, to feel concern for the other, to want to help the other. What happens when we lose touch with that compassion instinct? Listen to the news, read the paper.

When life becomes overwhelming, scary and unbearable it is easy to become fearful, to shut down, to want to protect ourselves and to distant ourselves from others. In our fear, in our distancing, and in our shutting ourselves off, our compassion instinct is repressed, and we can become negative, uncaring and downright malicious.

Jesus calls us to love others but it's hard to love others when we are driven by deep-seated fear of the other and when our fear feeds hatred and intolerance. What we know and see is that when people become angry and when we feel threatened by the other whom we fear or hate, we lash out with language and actions that violate human rights and violence that ends innocent lives.

I attended a workshop on Friday entitled Why Church. 10 people from all walks of life and faith or no faith were invited to talk about why church matters. Three of the people who spoke shared with us about the discrimination and prejudice they have experienced. As I listened, I heard in some of their stories that the negative assumptions of human nature that I mentioned earlier was the fodder for the dehumanizing language and behavior that was directed at them. Each of them expressed that church mattered to them because of the compassion and love they received from their encounters in some churches.

Friends, I am not suggesting that acts of compassion are not changing lives, because they are, and they are in remarkable ways. But we need to be doing better. Daily we all need to be cultivating and fostering kindness, understanding and care.

In his ministry and life Jesus showed how the compassion instinct works. He taught and lived compassion and in so doing overturned assumptions about who deserved to be loved, who had control of God, who was clean and who was righteous. Jesus connected with the suffering of others. He told parables such as the Good Samaritan to help others understand what compassion looks like. He stood with and bore up the other, embraced and loved those who suffered because he believed that every person mattered, and every life was significant. He touched the untouchable, walked and ate with the despised, and cherished the unloved. It was as if Jesus' own well-being was bound up in the well-being of the other. As Christians this compassionate Jesus is whom we are called to follow. When we see God at work in Jesus' compassion then we too must be doing God's work knowing that own well-being is bound up in the well-being of others and that compassion is the way we honour the divine humanity of others and our own.

Our compassion instinct at work frees us from the selfishness of power, the destructiveness of hate, the dehumanizing force of bigotry, the narrowness of our beliefs and attitudes and from the idea that we are separate from others. When our compassion is ignited then we can help to restore compassionate thinking and action.

Compassion enables us to acknowledge that everybody is related, that you are a member of everybody, and everybody is a member of you, and we value all life, no matter one's religion, colour, race or sexual orientation. With no disempowering energies or attitudes to impede it, compassion flows naturally between people inviting a greater sense of emotional, physical and spiritual well-being for everyone.

The Dalai Lama said, "I have found that the greatest degree of inner tranquility comes from the development of love and compassion." For the survival of the human and non-human world and for the sake of our relationships, for our church, and for the world, we must ignite our compassion instinct, and let kindness, justice, and acceptance flow through our words and actions so that we can become life givers and healers and help create healthy communities and a compassionate global community. My friends, compassion is the greatest gift we can give to one another and to the world. Amen.