

# Compassion and Revolutionary Love

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One of the most important words in all the major world's religions is "compassion." Indeed, it's an important word to describe what it means to be human.

For me, compassion is at the heart of faith. It describes how God relates to the world. It also describes a way in which we can live together. Compassion is increasingly needed in this contentious time. Whether you have faith or not, it is an essential trait for people to be truly human; if you lack compassion, you are described as hardhearted and unfeeling.

In English, compassion comes from two Latin words: "cum" which means "with" and "passio" which means "to suffer." Compassion literally means "to suffer with" someone. It is the feeling which arises when you are confronted with someone's suffering and are moved to relieve that suffering. To use the old image, compassion is precisely what it means to "walk in someone's shoes for a mile."

In Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, the word for compassion is "rechemet". The root "rechem" means "womb". Rechemet is a beautiful image of mother love. It describes our amazing and miraculous home before we are born. The womb is a place of nourishment and protection. The vulnerable embryo is cradled in the womb and prepared to burst into life. But we can only stay in the womb for just the right amount of time. If we stay too long, unhealthy things happen to both baby and mother. It becomes toxic, and dangerous to both. If we don't stay long enough, we take the risk of not being fully formed, and therefore unable to survive in the world, as well as being highly susceptible to diseases.

It is quite astonishing that ancient Israel would use this image to speak of God our Mother. She nourishes us and nurtures us. She cradles us in love until we are ready to be born. In the midst of life, God treats us with compassion, and invites us to treat others equally compassionately.

This Hebrew root helps enrich my understanding of how I might live with compassion. In the same way that a womb is necessary, so is compassion a necessary element in our common life. We need to carry a person who is hurting or needy in the womb of our compassion. We can build the person up, nourish and encourage and strengthen him or her.

But too long, and it turns toxic. There comes a time when a person must be released from the womb of compassion and begin to mature on his or her own.

This image enriches our sense of who God is. She loves the world with a deep and abiding compassion. She loves the world with a nurturing and gentle caring. It's a gift when we can recapture such feminine images as we develop a more wholistic image of God.

This image of compassion as being womb-love was highlighted for me in a talk given by Valarie Kaur at the Metropolitan AME Church in Washington DC. She spoke at a watch night service on New Year's Eve 2016, organized by the Poor People's Campaign and its director, Rev. William Barber.

Kaur is a renowned Sikh activist, film maker, and civil rights lawyer. This prophetic voice founded The Revolutionary Love Project which champions the ethic of love in movements for justice. This Project promises, "We commit to fight for justice through the ethic of love — love for others, our opponents, and ourselves."

God knows we need an ethic of love right now. In this time of darkness ... the darkness of the pandemic, the darkness of racial tension, the darkness of climate change, the darkness of prejudice and hatred being experienced by people of colour, the darkness of polarized partisan

speech ... we need this level of compassion. We do not live in this world by ourselves. We cannot insist on our own rights as if the rights of others had no value. We must find healthy ways to live together, or we will surely fall into chaos.

Kaur told the story of the prejudice and hatred her Sikh grandfather experienced as he immigrated to the USA, a hatred which intensified after 9–11. That hatred is growing exponentially with the rise of white nationalist movements and in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. Acts of hatred against Jews and Muslims and Sikhs and people of colour are on the rise. In the midst of this time of darkness for people of colour, Kaur asks, “What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?”

I was gobsmacked by this powerful and provocative question. I have been reflecting on it for months. When Kaur posed the question this way, I thought immediately of rechemet. She continued to ask related questions. Could the history of her nation, the USA, be a story of one long labour? “What if all of our grandfathers and grandmothers are standing behind us now, those who survived occupation and genocide, slavery and Jim Crow, detentions and political assault?” In Canada, could our ugly story of residential schools, the ‘60s scoop, murdered and missing Indigenous women be a story of one long labour? Might our story of racism against Japanese and other people of colour be the groaning of labour as a spirit of compassion is being born?

Kaur concludes, “What does the midwife tell us to do? Breathe. And then? Push. Because if we don’t push, we will die. If we don’t push, our nation will die. Tonight, we breathe. Tomorrow, we will labour in love ... and revolutionary love is the magic we will show our children.”

Kaur points us to a way of faithful, prophetic living. We breathe. Then we push, labouring in radical, revolutionary love to give birth to compassion in our life together, as we honour one another in our common humanity.