

Ash Wednesday

February 22, 2023

Wrestling with Compassion

Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.*

—Psalm 51:11, Book of Common Prayer, p. 266

As a lover of fountain pens, pencils, and smooth paper beautifully bound, it is nearly impossible for me to pass a stationary store without going in. You know, just to look. Every new pen or journal is an opportunity to begin again, start over, and dream on paper. In the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, I packed up a brand new journal and my running gear to attend a running retreat that included a workshop on journaling. My running coach led the workshop and reminded me of the practice of ending each day by jotting down just a few things for which I was grateful. Gratitude journals have been around forever, but being reminded of the practice helped me avoid feeling stuck or frustrated with my running and—more importantly—with my life. Surely I could find something to be grateful for beyond thanking God for living to see another day.

The theme of this year's Living Compass Lenten Devotional is *Practicing Compassion with All Your Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*. It is just now occurring to me that I can't ever remember seeing a "compassion journal" on the shelves of the book and stationary stores I frequent. There are no "compassion journal workshops" offered with any frequency. As we live with the trauma of surviving a global pandemic and its cascading effects on mental health, healthcare, housing, employment, the supply chain, and the economy, not to mention the additional tragedies caused by climate change, natural disasters, and political divisions, many of us may be teetering on the edge of compassion fatigue—if we haven't already succumbed.

But Lent is a chance to wrestle with compassion once more. The 40 days that begin today give us the opportunity to reflect on the ways we participate in the suffering and brokenness of the world while holding ourselves and others with love and compassion as we seek healing. What if the journey with Jesus to the cross and tomb was an opportunity to dwell in the gaze of the one who looks upon us all with compassion and love? Imagine keeping a “compassion journal,” noting the small and large gestures of compassion offered and received?

Like gratitude, it takes practice to be gentle and kind to oneself and others we meet each day. Practicing compassion need not be another “should” to inspire guilt, nor a pursuit that requires special equipment—not even pens and journals. Simply praying for the awareness of God’s loving gaze that is cast upon the hurting and vulnerable, even and especially ourselves, is one way to begin. May you be blessed by this Lenten journey with our compassionate and loving God.



Thursday, February 23, 2023

A Companion Journal

Scott Stoner

Simply praying for the awareness of God's loving gaze that is cast upon the hurting and vulnerable, even and especially ourselves, is one way to begin.

—Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows

After Jennifer invited us to begin our Lenten journey with prayer, it seems appropriate to start today's reflection with a prayer.

Gracious and compassionate God, awaken our awareness to the abiding love you have for all people, especially for those suffering and most vulnerable. And with our hearts awakened, guide us to be your voices and hands of compassion in the world as we respond to the needs of those who are hurting.

In the third week of this devotional, we will reflect more deeply on the connection between prayer and compassion. It is important to note that as people of faith, our compassion and love for others flow from our relationship with God. If our love and compassion for others are grounded only in our own strength and efforts, we will be inconsistent at best. When it is grounded in God's love and is an expression of that love flowing through us, our compassion will be deeper and sustained.

In the spirit of yesterday's Ash Wednesday reflection, we hope you will use this devotional as your own "compassion journal." One way to begin is by responding to the "Making it Personal" prompts that follow each day's reflection. You can use the spaces and blank pages provided to record your thoughts and feelings and wonderings about God's compassion and the compassion that God is calling you to offer, both to others and to yourself.

Making it Personal: Slowly pray the prayer offered above two or three times. What words or phrase speak to you in this prayer? What connection do you see between prayer and compassion? What do you think of the idea of using this devotional as a personal "compassion journal," a place where you can capture your thoughts during Lent?

Friday, February 24, 2023

Defining Compassion

Scott Stoner

The meaning of compassion is “sympathetic consciousness of others’ distress together with a desire to alleviate it.”

—Merriam-Webster Dictionary

The focus of this devotional is *Practicing Compassion with All Your Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*. Let’s begin by taking a look at what we mean by the word *compassion*. Compassion is formed from *com*, which means *with*, and *passion*, which means *suffering*. So one understanding of compassion is that it means *to suffer with another*. We will also explore other ways of understanding compassion throughout Lent.

The Oxford English Dictionary’s definition is similar: *The feeling or emotion, when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another, and by the desire to relieve it*. Both state that compassion combines a feeling of being moved by another’s suffering with the desire to relieve that suffering.

We are taking time to define compassion because when we think of compassion, there are other words that are similar but not the same. In tomorrow’s reflection we’ll explore the differences between sympathy, empathy, and compassion, but today we’ll consider the difference between kindness and compassion.

While closely related, compassion is a response to suffering, whereas kindness is not necessarily connected to suffering. Buying a birthday card for a friend is an act of kindness, but we wouldn’t think of it as an act of compassion. However, visiting a friend in the hospital is an act of compassion. It is also a kind thing to do, but because the friend is suffering it is an expression of compassion. In these examples we see that a critical component of compassion is a feeling *combined* with a desire to respond to some experience of hurt or suffering. This understanding applies both to compassion toward others and ourselves.

Making it Personal: What stands out to you in the two definitions of compassion? Is there anything you would add to either of these definitions? Do you see a difference between kindness and compassion? Can you think of examples of both in your own life?



Saturday, February 25, 2023

Empathy, Sympathy & Compassion

Scott Stoner

*Bear one another's burdens, and in this way
you will fulfil the law of Christ.*

—Galatians 6:2

As we continue to gain a deeper understanding of compassion, today we will reflect on how it is both similar to and different from empathy and sympathy.

Empathy is the experience of feeling what another person is feeling. If a friend tells us their beloved pet has just died, and we know that feeling ourselves, we will empathize and feel that experience *with* them.

When we feel sympathy, while we are moved by a person's suffering, we are not experiencing emotional pain with them. We feel bad that they are suffering, but we aren't suffering with them. In the example of a friend whose pet died, if I had never experienced the loss of a beloved pet, I would likely feel sympathy *for* them in that I see their distress and express sorrow for their loss, but I am not joining with them emotionally in their loss.

We move into compassion when empathy or sympathy is joined by a desire to lessen the pain of another. For example, an empathic response might be, "My heart aches for you. I know what that's like. I am so sorry for your loss." This expression of empathy moves into compassion when it is joined by a wish to bring some relief to another's suffering. We might respond, "My heart aches for you. If you need anything, my door is always open, anytime of the day or night."

These are just some initial thoughts about compassion. We will continue to explore different ways we can both understand and practice compassion throughout Lent. Our hope is that we all be blessed in our desire to deepen the practice of compassion for both others and ourselves.

Making it Personal: How do you distinguish between empathy, sympathy, and compassion? Can you think of a time when you felt either empathy or sympathy that was joined with a desire to somehow lessen the suffering of another and were moved to respond in a compassionate way?

Notes/Reflections

The First Sunday in Lent

February 26, 2023

Making Space for Love

Laurie Brock

Jesus, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself.

—Philippians 2:5-7 (NRSVue)

My horse Nina is fed a mash of bran and oats and other good stuff once a week. It's different from her usual feed of oats, hay, and lush Kentucky grass. This mash is a weekly addition to her diet that helps her stay healthy.

Nina, of course, appreciates her mash ... to a point. After she slurps up the warm, tasty slush, she leaves a residue in the bottom of her feed trough. As the days wear on, the residue dries to a hard crust that can build up in her feed trough.

Why Nina doesn't eat all the mash but instead chooses to leave some to accumulate is a mystery to me. I trust she knows what is mostly good for her and what she likes, so she leaves the rest, knowing that someone (usually me) will come and scrape the stuff from the bottom of her food bucket so there's no build up.

The people in our lives regularly feed us all sorts of things too, such as positive and negative emotions, desires, expectations, hurts, disappointments, companionship, all manner of stuff—some good, some not so good—that gets put in the bowls of our selves and souls. Hopefully, we let what's nourishing feed us, sustain us, and help us.

But what do we do with the stuff that isn't helpful, useful, or nourishing? What do we do with the gnawing anger, the grudges, the shame, and the other feelings that accumulate and take up room in our souls? Too often, we let the unhelpful stuff accumulate in the containers of our selves and souls, building up so that eventually there is precious little room left to hold the things Jesus shares with us so that we, in turn, can share with others.

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Lent is a holy reminder that we all need to take time to scrape out the muck, the slurry, the stuff that either was never helpful, or perhaps once was but now no longer nourishes our hearts, minds, bodies, and souls. Lent is a focused season of prayer, of study, of contemplation, of worship, the perfect season for allowing Jesus to help us with the process of clearing out the stuff from our souls that is obscuring our love for God, each other, and for ourselves.

I imagine that when Jesus reaches into the space that is my soul, that is our human souls, he finds them quite packed with stuff. So much stuff, in fact, that the space we need to allow compassion to live and breathe is congested. So Jesus starts scraping, which is not always painless, but almost always necessary, in order to help us create space for the good stuff, for love.

Compassion is also one of those good things. Compassion means we have room to be with others in their suffering, in their sorrow, in the moments of bittersweet sadness. We need space to be companions to others in their times of need, but we cannot do that when our souls are too crowded with a slurry of sin, however that sin has settled in our souls.

This Lent, once we have been deeply nourished and spacious room has been created by the compassionate care and love of Jesus, may we be filled with the goodness of God's love. And out of this love, may we freely share that healing love with those we meet along the way.
