



Monday, February 27, 2023

## Compassion and Faith

Scott Stoner

*The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.*

—Psalm 116:5 (NIV)

Beginning today and continuing each Monday in Lent, we will introduce a theme for the week that provides a specific focus on one aspect of our overall theme of *Practicing Compassion*. This week we will focus on *Compassion and Faith*. Compassion is at the very heart of God and, therefore, of our faith. As the portion of Psalm 116 above tells us, God is gracious, righteous, and full of compassion toward all life. As people of faith, we also aspire to be people who are gracious and righteous and full of compassion toward all.

In yesterday’s reflection, as part of observing Lent, Laurie Brock invited us to fill our souls with the “nourishment of God’s healing love.” This gets to the heart of why we are focusing this week on the connection between compassion and faith. Our capacity to offer compassion to others is directly related to our ability to open ourselves to receiving God’s compassion for ourselves.

In the First Letter of John, the writer says that “God is love,” and goes on to say, “We love because God first loved us” (1 John 4:16,19). Rooted in God’s love and compassion, our compassion is a fruit of our faith. When we regularly fill our cups with the living water of God’s love, we are more likely to have the ability and the desire to offer that living water to others.

**Making it Personal:** What initial thoughts do you have about the link between faith and compassion? Do you see a connection between your relationship with God and how you’re feeling or how you have felt compassion toward others? How do the two Scripture passages in this reflection speak to you right now?

---



---



---



---

Tuesday, February 28, 2023

## Scraping Out Our Buckets

Scott Stoner

*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 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.*

—Laurie Brock

The quote above, from Laurie Brock's Sunday reflection, reminds me of a story. A man goes to see a wise spiritual teacher. After listening to the man talk about himself at great length, the teacher realizes that she will need to get his attention before she can teach him anything because he is so preoccupied with himself. So she offers the man a cup of tea, which he gladly accepts. She begins pouring and as the tea approaches the top of the cup, instead of stopping, she continues until it spills over the top and onto the man's lap.

The man, upset, asks her why she did that. She responds kindly, "I wanted you to see that you are like this cup of tea. You are so full to overflowing with your own concerns that there is no room for any teachings from God or others to enter at this point." The man paused, bowed his head, and thanked her for the memorable lesson.

Lent is a time to examine the thoughts, habits, and actions in our lives that are blocking us from being open to God. These could include any of the following: anger, impatience, busyness, distractedness, judgment, self-righteousness, envy, greed, self-centeredness, or indifference. Becoming aware of these is the first step in allowing Jesus to, as Laurie wrote, scrape out "the stuff from our souls that is obscuring our love for God" so that we can make room to better receive once again the compassionate love of God.

**Making it Personal:** What is your response to the quote from Laurie Brock? The reflection lists many things that can distance or block us from God's healing love. Did anything listed resonate with you?



Wednesday, March 1, 2023

## Grammar of Faith

Robbin Brent

*The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God,  
slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.*

—Exodus 34:6 (NIV)

**E**ngaging with the theme of compassion has transformed my understanding and awareness of God's great love and hope for us. That God is always turned toward us and always ready to respond because of God's ever-present, unconditional, healing love.

The passage above from Exodus contain the first self-describing words God uses in the Bible. And these same words are repeated many hundreds of times throughout the Old and New Testaments. I was surprised to learn that at their root (Hebrew and Greek), these words—compassion, mercy, faithfulness, lovingkindness, goodness, forgiveness, healing, trust, and womb—all come from the same origins. The connection between some of the essential vocabulary of our faith allows us to get a sense of the awe-inspiring relational dynamism of God's participation at every step of the way on our journey of faith.

These words are meant to be understood collectively, as strands of a wholistic, unitive relational web, much like the web of a spider. These silk weavers spin webs that are strong (some stronger than steel), life-giving, and resilient, as each strand of the web is created for a specific purpose. They spin strands to wrap the eggs of their unborn. They spin strands to anchor themselves so if they fall, they don't fall too far. These sensitive strands sustain them by alerting them through vibration to the presence of food. The silk is their source of nourishment, protection, growth, and flourishing, just as the compassionate web of God—created out of an infinite array of strands—holds, nourishes, protects, and sustains all of creation.

**Making it Personal:** Do the connections between the words mentioned above expand or deepen your understanding of God's loving compassionate presence in the world? Describe in what ways. Are there other words you would add?

Thursday, March 2, 2023

## God of Compassion and Healing

Scott Stoner

*Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.*

—Isaiah 49:13

There is a common misunderstanding about compassion and God that many of us, myself included, were taught at one point. This is the idea that the God of the Old Testament is angry, even vengeful, and that the God of the New Testament is a God of love and compassion. Like many simplistic dichotomies, this is neither true nor helpful. For example, see the passage above from the Old Testament book of Isaiah.

The idea of being afraid of God's wrath is not just something attributed to the Old Testament. I also find that many people have a fear-based image of God that often includes a fear that God will punish them for something they have done. As a priest, when a person is experiencing suffering or misfortune, I often hear some version of the question, "I wonder what I did to deserve this?"

I do not believe that the God of compassion we worship and follow ever intentionally harms people. At the same time, God does not save us from the natural consequences of our choices. While God is never the cause of our suffering, God is always moved to join us in our hurt and to be a part of our healing if we are open to that. No matter the source of our suffering, I believe God always responds with love and compassion.

**Making it Personal:** Are you aware of any fearful thoughts you have of God, perhaps thinking of God as vengeful? What do you think of the idea that God is never the cause of our suffering but is always with us in that suffering and is always a part of our healing?

---

---

---

---



Friday, March 3, 2023

## From Belief to Faith

Robbin Brent

*Faith is taking the first step even when  
you can't see the whole stairway.*

—The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

**D**uring his service in the military, my youngest son was part of two airborne divisions, which meant he often was required to jump out of aircraft and descend at a very quick clip in order to avoid being detected. The army has a formula for how many feet per second a soldier can drop and still land (mostly) intact. It is very fast. In order to do this, he first had to believe that his parachute would keep him safe, and then he had to place his faith in it by jumping. This is one of the distinctions between belief and faith. I might believe that parachutes work, but would not put my faith in one by jumping out of an airplane. He believed and then acted out of his belief. That is faith.

Both faith and compassion are used together many hundreds of times throughout Scripture to describe great love, deeply felt and then expressed through acts of steadfast lovingkindness, mercy, goodness, and faithfulness. As Dr. King expressed so well in the quote above, while we often have no idea of the ways in which our compassion matters, we are called to have faith that we are the visible heart and arms of God at work in the world. We make a commitment to act on our belief in a God of love, trusting that even when we don't, God knows where we are going.

It is our faith in God, expressed through our willingness to act on what we believe, that prepares our minds and hearts to respond compassionately to suffering, our own, others, and the world's.

**Making it Personal:** How do you experience the relationship between your beliefs, your faith, and your ability to respond compassionately? Jesus is just one example from Scripture of someone who remained true to his beliefs by living a life of faithfulness and compassion. Can you think of others? How might they inspire your own journey of faith?

Saturday, March 4, 2023

## The Willingness to Give and to Receive

Jan Kwiatkowski

*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

—Romans 8:38-39

Assuring those facing the end of life that nothing could separate them from God's love was part of many conversations I frequently had with the dying. These conversations were especially powerful with those who were seeking forgiveness and relief for the guilt and shame they had been carrying for many years.

Many I tended to in hospice were terrified to die because they had accepted and internalized either what they had told themselves, or what was told to them by significant others. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, they, or others, had pointed toward misdeeds in order to prove they were inherently flawed and unworthy of God's compassionate love. Judgmental words perhaps intended as correction became barriers not only to their ability to experience God's compassion, but also to the compassion they were withholding from themselves. What I've found essential to remind those for whom I have cared was beautifully expressed by Scott Stoner last Monday: "Our capacity to offer compassion to others is directly related to our ability to open ourselves to receiving God's compassion for ourselves."

As we close this first week in Lent where we focused on the relationship between our faith and compassion, I invite us to reflect on how our faith supports our willingness to receive God's compassion, as well as our willingness to extend compassion to ourselves. When we are willing to receive the gift of compassion, we have a gift we can then offer to others.

**Making it Personal:** What, if anything, might be a barrier to your willingness to accept compassion, from God, others, or yourself? Having reflected on faith and compassion this week, how has your understanding of your faith and your willingness to both receive and to offer compassion changed or deepened?

# *The Second Sunday in Lent*

March 5, 2023

## **Connected to the Source**

Jake Owensby

*What we are asked to do is to love, and this love itself  
will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy.*

—Thomas Merton

**T**hey didn't have to take us in. Strictly speaking, it was risky. Mom and I were strangers to them. Nothing more than distant friends of a distant friend. B- and his wife R- were retired. Pushing their mid-seventies.

Our options were slim. We would either sleep under their roof or huddle in our battered car. So the old couple invited us to stay the night.

Their house was small and worn by time and weather. Mom got the spare room. I slept on a cot in the dining room. This was home for about a month.

Our hosts fed us and helped my mother get a job. Eventually, they found us a temporary, rent-free place of our own until we could get back on our feet.

I was eleven years old.

At the time, all I could feel was shame. Being poor and homeless is tough on the soul. It gnawed away at my sense of self-worth and dignity.

I cannot describe the transformative effect of having two strangers welcome me into their home and invite me to call them Aunt and Uncle. But I can tell you what that power is called. It's called compassion. And I believe that I know where that power comes from.

Jesus once said that you have to be born from above to see the kingdom of heaven. Jesus was saying that we can live a God-connected life. Later in John's Gospel Jesus promised that, after his resurrection and ascension, he would send the Holy Spirit to dwell in us. The very presence of God within us can be our primary motivating force and our navigational principle.

