



Monday, March 6, 2023

Compassion and Listening

Scott Stoner

*God is love. So the Spirit counsels us, guides us toward compassion
in all the complex and varied circumstances of our lives.*

—Jake Owensby

For this week's theme, we will explore how our capacity to be compassionate is deeply connected with our ability to listen. We begin with the premise that compassion always starts with listening. In fact, a compassionate response is not possible without first listening.

The reflection for February 24 introduced this definition of compassion: "Compassion is sympathetic consciousness of others' distress *together* with a desire to alleviate it." To become conscious of another person's distress, we must be willing to first deeply listen to them, attempting to understand what they are experiencing.

If we don't first make an effort to deeply hear another person's struggle, our response will often fall short of being compassionate and may not be at all comforting to the other person. Imagine, for example, that a friend is telling me they were just down-sized out of a job they loved and had been doing for a long time. They describe how upset they are and wonder if they will ever be able to find a job they love as much. If I am only half paying attention and not really taking in what this all means to them, I might offer a less-than-helpful response, such as, "Don't worry, I'm sure you will find another job soon, given how strong the job market is right now."

In this example, my response is not compassionate because I do not truly listen to nor honor the depth of grief my friend is expressing. In fact, rather than offering relief for my friend's suffering, I might instead be adding to it as now they also feel unheard and alone.

Making it Personal: What are your initial thoughts about the connection between compassion and listening? Can you think of a time when someone shared their pain with you and you only half-listened? If so, did that affect your ability to respond with compassion?

Tuesday, March 7, 2023

Compassionate Listening

Scott Stoner

*I've learned that people will forget what you said,
people will forget what you did, but people will
never forget how you made them feel.*

—Maya Angelou

We all have had the experience of someone pretending to listen to us but whose mind is obviously elsewhere. A common example is when we are at a group gathering, and the person we are talking with is busy looking over our shoulder for whomever they want to talk to next. Or when we respond honestly when someone asks us how we are doing and they quickly change the subject because they don't actually want to hear what might be unsettling to them. Neither of these experiences, as you might imagine, helps to make the speaker feel valued and connected.

On the other hand, most of us have likely had the experience of sharing something painful and having someone offer us the gift of their full attention, of being truly present to us. In those moments, the gift of their compassionate listening makes us feel valued and connected.

All of us know someone who could benefit from the gift of our deep listening to them right now. Perhaps they are going through a difficult time or are feeling alone. Maybe they are going through a big life transition and are feeling unsure. Perhaps they are excited about something, but nervous at the same time. As we focus this week on listening and compassion, I wonder how things might change if each of us could reach out to someone we know who could benefit from our listening and compassion.

When we offer the gift of compassionate listening to others, to paraphrase Maya Angelou, they may not remember anything we say or do, but they will always remember how they felt deeply seen, heard, and cared for.

Making it Personal: Can you think of a time when you felt someone's compassion simply because they deeply listened to you? How did that make you feel? To whom might you offer the gift of being fully attentive and compassionately listening today?



Wednesday, March 8, 2023

Listening beneath the Surface

Robbin Brent

*Today, and all the days of my life, grant me
the strength to examine my heart. May I be
faithful, God, to your gift of truth in me.*

—Beverly Lanzetta

As we practice compassionate listening, we are better able to listen beneath surface emotions and appearances to the deeper places where we, and others, are hurting. Prayerful listening from that deeper place opens our hearts and minds to the pain and distress, our own and others, that otherwise might go unnoticed. Listening deeply to sorrow however it shows up in our lives and relationships is an important step on our journey of practicing compassion.

One spiritual prayer practice that can enhance our ability to listen is the Daily Examen. While we can apply this practice to any area of our lives, we can use it in a particular way to help us pay attention to where God may be guiding us in our practice of deep listening (the full practice is on pp. 80–81). First, we sit quietly as we listen for God. Then, looking back over the day, we notice times when we felt most alive and thank God for those moments; times when we felt the least grateful and offer those with thanks to God; times when we offered or received, or weren't able to offer or receive, the gift of compassionate listening; and finally, we notice moments when we either felt aligned with, or far from, living out God's purpose for our lives and offer these to God too.

One of the gifts of this practice is that it strengthens our ability to be fully present with ourselves as we listen for God. This, in turn, strengthens our ability to listen to others in a loving, kind, and generous way that reflects our desire, with God's help, to respond compassionately as we are able.

Making it Personal: If you engaged with the Daily Examen practice, were you surprised by anything that came up around your willingness to practice compassionate listening? Any new ah-ha's, insights, or inspiration? Is there anything you feel ready to do based on what you learned from this practice?

Thursday, March 9, 2023

Learning from the Good Samaritan

Scott Stoner

“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

—Luke 10:36-37

The story of the Good Samaritan from the tenth chapter of Luke is one of the best-known teachings of Jesus about compassion. In this parable, a man has been beaten up and left for dead by the side of the road. A priest and a Levite both see the man and pass by him, not wanting to get involved. Then the Samaritan comes by, chooses to respond fully to the man, and offers him what he needs to heal.

Many factors are involved in this story of compassion, but it all starts with someone being willing to listen. Like the first two men, we too at times choose to walk around the suffering of another, not wanting to be a witness to what they are experiencing, perhaps because it makes us uncomfortable. To truly listen to another’s suffering is to risk getting close to their pain and allowing ourselves to feel it. When we listen in that sincere way, we may find ourselves moved so deeply that we can no longer merely walk on by. Once we learn what they need, we may be moved to show compassion.

The Good Samaritan is a model for all of us of what it means to not ignore or walk around the pain of another, of what it means to choose to listen and respond with compassion.

Making it Personal: As you reflect today, you might want to reread the parable found in Luke 10:25-37. How does the Parable of the Good Samaritan speak to you about listening and compassion? Is there a particular person or situation that God is calling you to listen to and offer compassion to, perhaps one that initially makes you uncomfortable?



Friday, March 10, 2023

Listening with the Ears of Our Heart

Robbin Brent

The greatest thing you can do in this life is to cultivate and exercise compassion. Life is about learning how to flow with your basic goodness. It's about entering the heart and making it the fount of your being.

—Robert Lax

I get so much pleasure from watching and listening to my grandchildren play. They seem instinctively to listen with the ears of their heart, engaging and responding wholeheartedly to the world around them. Perhaps they are infused with joy and boundless energy because they don't spend precious energy overthinking their experience. They simply take it in, reveling in all of God's creation. Just as children do naturally, how can we learn to better listen with the ears of our heart?

One way we can learn to listen like a child is by showing up in the present moment and paying attention, being curious rather than judgmental. That quality of open, kind presence creates a spaciousness in which we can learn to see and hear with the eyes of our heart, from love, not fear.

Paul also provides some useful tips. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:16-18). When we cultivate joy, a regular prayer practice, and a commitment to notice what we are most grateful for each day, we learn how to move beneath the level of the mind to listen from a place of love, kindness, and deep compassion. From this place we get a richer sense of what it is like to be deeply and truly seen, heard, and loved by God. From this place we infuse our lives, and the lives of others, with the infinite joyful love of God.

Making it Personal: What do you think of the idea that we can better hear what matters most when we listen with the ears of our heart? Do you think Paul's wise counsel—expressing joy, praying often, and looking for what we are most grateful each day—might support your desire to listen from your heart rather than simply your head? If so, what is one that you are ready to practice regularly this Lent?

Saturday, March 11, 2023

What Can Jesus Do for You?

Jan Kwiatkowski

*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying
heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*

—Matthew 11:28

Many years ago, I spoke with my pastor about some challenging medical things our family was facing. I hadn't gone into the conversation looking for something specific; I was just updating him on what was happening. As he always did, he listened deeply and patiently, giving me all the time I needed. He was listening, not only to what I was saying, but also to what I might have left unsaid. Once I was finished, we sat for a few moments in silence, and then he looked at me, noting how tired I was, and asked a seemingly simple question: "What can Jesus do for you?"

I was more than a little thrown by his question. The initial knee-jerk response I heard in my head was "I have no idea," which was joined by numerous other things simultaneously running through my mind. "Jesus do something for me? Jesus is my role model, guide, teacher, and faithful companion. Isn't that enough? Besides, I've got too much to do and think about and worry about to be spending time and energy wondering what I need. Why should I bother Jesus with what I need when it seems minimal compared to the needs of so many others in the world?"

Despite all that going on in my head, I left that day without giving my pastor much of an answer, yet I've continued to revisit and respond to his question many times since then. Experience has taught me that when I allow my heart to know and speak its deepest needs, there is a compassionate, close-to-my-heart Jesus who hears. I've come to understand that to practice self-compassion is to accept a gift from a Jesus who hears, knows, and generously offers what my heart most needs.

Making it Personal: What was your initial response to the question, "What can Jesus do for you"? How do you understand the relationship between listening and self-compassion? What can Jesus do for you?

The Third Sunday in Lent

March 12, 2023

The Gift of Kindness

Jana Troutman-Miller

*Love and kindness are never wasted. They always
make a difference. They bless the one who receives
them, and they bless you, the giver.*

—Barbara De Angelis

Many years ago, while visiting friends in Europe, I experienced one of the most lovely moments of compassion extended to me from a stranger. I had been in Prague several days and was leaving by train to go on to Germany. It was my birthday. At the station, sensing that I was feeling sad about saying goodbye and being alone for the next ten hours on the train, my friends gave me tender hugs and three roses to keep me company—wonderful acts of both kindness and compassion.

Along the way, an older gentleman came on board with a large bundle of at least six-dozen long-stemmed roses. He gently placed the flowers overhead, sat down across from me, and began to chat with the man next to him. After a while he stood up, took down the roses, and gave one to the other man. Then he looked over at me and said something to me in German. When I told him that I didn't understand, he motioned to my three roses with a questioning look. I realized then what he was asking and I told him that it was my birthday and that my friends gave these to me to help keep me company. He smiled, then carefully selected one of his roses and presented it to me. Deeply moved by his kind, compassionate gesture, I thanked him over and over as I fought back tears. Soon we were at our next stop where the man got off. As he was leaving he told me that he loves being able to do kind things for people to make them happy.

That seemingly small gesture meant so much to me. Without even realizing it until that moment, receiving a rose from this stranger was just what I needed. I also realized that he too had a need met that day. His need

