



Monday, March 13, 2023

Compassion and Prayer

Scott Stoner

Pray as though everything depended on God.

Work as though everything depended on you.

—Saint Augustine

When someone shares with me that they are suffering in some way or facing a great challenge, I always try to listen deeply to what they are saying, resisting any urges to offer advice or platitudes. After I feel I have heard them and understand as best I can what they are going through, I often say to them, “I will hold you and your concerns in my prayers.”

This Lent we have learned that compassion involves the awareness of another person’s suffering joined by a desire to alleviate that suffering. Letting someone know that we will pray for them, or that we are praying for them, is a compassionate response because it offers reassurance that no matter what they are going through, they are not alone. It is also true that knowing someone is praying for us can help to ease our own suffering. In this expression of prayer we see a twofold connection between compassion and prayer, the theme for this week’s reflections.

Personally, I know that many times when I have shared with someone that I have been praying for them, they respond by saying that they could feel the prayers. And I find great comfort when I know others are praying for me. This is the mystical power of prayer as a way of offering compassion to someone who is hurting. Compassion and prayer are at the heart of the Christian life. This week we will explore how compassion and prayer are connected and how each informs the other. We have curated and included prayers related to the theme of *Practicing Compassion* on pp. 78–79.

Making it Personal: What are your initial thoughts about the connection between compassion and prayer? Have you ever felt comforted by knowing that someone was praying for you? Are there people currently for whom you pray regularly?

Tuesday, March 14, 2023

Being Attentive

Scott Stoner

*Let us be grateful, let us be attentive, let us be
open to what has never happened before.*

—John Philip Newell

“Pay attention to what you pay attention to” is a saying that is at the heart of many of our Living Compass wellness resources. We know that what we pay attention to is what will grow in our lives. Prayer is one way we direct our attention to focus more on who we want to be and who God wants us to be.

As we explore the connection between prayer and compassion this week, I invite you to focus some attention in your prayer life on praying for compassion. Pray for compassion for yourself, and pray for a deepening of your practice of offering compassion to others.

John Philip Newell is a writer and retreat leader who draws heavily on the wisdom of Celtic Christianity. He has written a beautiful prayer called *Presence* that I will close with. It is a prayer about presence and being attentive, two crucial aspects of practicing compassion.

*In the gift of this new day,
in the gift of the present moment,
in the gift of time and eternity intertwined,
let us be grateful,
let us be attentive,
let us be open to what has never happened before,
in the gift of this new day,
in the gift of the present moment,
in the gift of time and eternity intertwined.*

—*Presence*, from *Sounds of the Eternal: A Celtic Psalter*, 2002

Making it Personal: What speaks to you in this prayer? Do you see a connection between being attentive and being compassionate?



Wednesday, March 15, 2023

Prayers Written from the Heart

Robbin Brent

Beloved, help me to know I am never alone. Help me to trust in ever deepening ways that you created me in love to be an instrument of your healing life-giving love and compassion.

When suffering is present, it is natural to ask why it is happening and to wonder where God is in the midst of the pain. Listening deeply in prayer offers us a window into our need to wait for God, trusting in the expanded reality of God's timing, and trusting that God is always present. This week's theme inspired me to write a prayer to God, and then to write what I imagine God's compassionate response might be. It turned out to be a deep and prayerful call and response practice where I listened for guidance, trusting that God also dwells in my imagination. Here is part of my prayer:

Beloved, why is it so hard for me to fully believe that you love me, especially when I am at my lowest ebb, covered over in doubt, anger, and fear? Help me to trust in ever deepening ways that you created me in love to be an instrument of your healing life-giving love and compassion. Help me to know I am never alone. Amen.

Part of the response to my prayer:

Beloved of My Heart, you are growing each and every day in your trust and acceptance of how much I love you. Endlessly, without reserve. Trust that. Even when you suffering. Especially then. You were created in love to be an instrument of my infinite love and compassion. You are never alone. I will never let you go.

If writing a prayer appeals to you, you might begin by prayerfully opening your imagination and listening, trusting that God is there with you. You could also find a prayer that you are drawn to at this point in your life. We have included additional prayers related to compassion on pp 78–79.

Making it Personal: If you chose to write a prayer to and/or from God, what was the experience like for you? Did you discover anything surprising or insightful in your prayer? If you chose to find a prayer, which one or ones were you drawn to right now?

Thursday, March 16, 2023

The Merton Prayer

Scott Stoner

*I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you
will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

—Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton was a Cistercian monk who wrote prolifically from 1943 to 1968 about living a life deeply rooted in prayer and compassion. One of his most popular prayers is known simply as *The Merton Prayer*. I love this prayer for its humility. It is an honest prayer where Merton, who so many admire as a person of deep faith, acknowledges that sometimes even he feels lost in his desire to follow God. I am moved by the vulnerability and self-compassion he expresses in this prayer.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. / I do not see the road ahead of me. / I cannot know for certain where it will end. / nor do I really know myself, / and the fact that I think I am following your will / does not mean that I am actually doing so. / But I believe that the desire to please you / does in fact please you. / And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. / I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, / though I may know nothing about it. / Therefore will I trust you always though / I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. / I will not fear, for you are ever with me, / and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

—The Merton Prayer, from *Thoughts in Solitude*, Copyright © 1956, 1958 by The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani

Making it Personal: In what way does this prayer written by Thomas Merton speak to you? Do you see Merton praying for self-compassion in this prayer? What other connections do you see between this prayer and our theme of compassion?



Friday, March 17, 2023

Holy Women, Wisdom, and Prayer

Robbin Brent

Holy Spirit, giving life to all life, moving all creatures, root of all things, washing them clean, wiping out their mistakes, healing their wounds, you are our true life, luminous, wonderful, awakening the heart from its ancient sleep. Amen.

—St. Hildegard von Bingen

I created a small space in my home years ago where I could pause to pray each day. Just recently I found myself looking at and truly seeing my prayer space, as if for the first time. I've placed many treasured items here over the years to remind me of God's goodness, compassion, and love—an unusual shell, a drawing my grandson made for me, a smooth stone found at an important crossroads in my life, icons of all sorts, flowers, candles, a singing bowl. But what struck me on this particular morning was all of the women who had joined me in the space: Icons of Mary, mother of Jesus; three of Mary Magdalene; Hildegard of Bingen; three women of color modeled on the Rublev Trinity; and a small statue of Kuan Yin, the Tibetan deity of compassion and mercy given to me by my son.

While each is imbued with particular gifts, all serve as models of compassionate devotion, service, faithfulness, love, and healing. All model profound ways of sharing love in the world. Through their steadfast compassionate presence, I have more deeply experienced the fullness of the heart of God.

I want to be more like them. I want to embrace and embody gifts from each in my own life and spiritual journey. While I might not have always seen these holy women with my eyes, I have been blessed by their loving, wise, compassionate companionship every day as I pray.

Making it Personal: I often like to pray using the prayers of holy women, like the one above from Hildegard. Do you have particular prayers you turn to when you pray? Who or what inspires you as you pray? If you have a prayer space, what do you see when you look closely? Who or what might you choose to remind you of God's compassionate love?

Saturday, March 18, 2023

Closer to Home

Jan Kwiatkowski

Taking this world as it is and not as I would have it; trusting that You will make all things right if I surrender to Your will.

—Reinhold Niebuhr

Years ago, when I was in parish ministry, members of the church and I were wrestling with what it means to be compassionate, both in our church life, and in our individual lives. We noticed that we often found it easier to discuss people who were distant from us—people with whom we would likely never come in contact—than it was to discuss people and conditions closer to home.

Closer in, we tended to complain about crabby clerks at the grocery checkout, neighbors doing laundry late at night, or the ladies who insisted on using the silverware for coffee hour when those disposable wooden stir sticks would do just fine. We griped about times we were tired because one of our kids was sick and kept us up.

It took us time and reflection to realize that the way we were responding to those close by wasn't life-giving, for them or for us. And it was a long way from compassion. So we committed to praying regularly for the capacity to extend greater compassion to those with whom we lived and worked and worshipped. And along the way, we gleaned many gifts from our shared practice of compassionate prayer.

One prayer that always opened and softened our minds and hearts was the Serenity Prayer. Part of it is above. The full prayer is on p. 78. I pray that it continues to open our hearts to those closer to home.

Making it Personal: Who is not too far from you that might need prayer and compassion right now? Can you think of a time when you found it more challenging to respond compassionately toward those closer to home?

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 19, 2023

Help Yourself? Help Others.

Chris Yaw

Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

—John 9:39

A research study was recently done to help people with Multiple Sclerosis (MS). Researchers studied 132 patients with MS, splitting them into two groups. Both learned coping skills. Group #1 learned from respected experts in the field, while Group #2 learned from their peers: five fellow MS patients who had shown an interest in helping fellow sufferers and had undergone special training. The goal was to see which group fared better.

The surprise finding was that neither group fared as well as did the five MS sufferers who had been trained to offer support to Group #2. Researchers noted dramatic changes in how they viewed themselves and their lives. Depression, self-confidence, and self-esteem improved markedly. The study concluded that giving support improved health more than receiving it, with one researcher concluding, "These people had undergone a spiritual transformation that gave them a refreshed view of who they were."

The idea that compassionately caring for others brings healing for caregivers is as old as it is neglected. When you and I hurt we turn inward, our attention focuses on ourselves, and we don't naturally think that actively showing compassion to others might benefit us. But it does.

In John 9 we witness an iconic healing scenario, when Jesus has compassion on a blind man, heals him, and causes the upholders of the religious institution great consternation. They simply cannot make sense of Jesus and what he's trying to do. We see these religious folks choosing pride over humility, prestige over service, and judgment over compassion.

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

In the introduction to the book, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*, co-author Henri Nouwen points out that compassion comes from two Latin words, which together mean *to suffer with*. Jesus is pointing out that those who were in a position to suffer with, but chose not to, become subject to negative consequences. Being blind to compassion keeps us from reaping compassion's rewards, which are none other than healing, restoration, and reconciliation.

In *Compassion*, Nouwen goes on to write: "Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human."

So, we might ask ...

In what ways are we avoiding compassion, and thus missing out on its benefits?

How are we choosing our own comfort, convenience, and safety over the "suffering with" of others?

How might we better develop compassion in ourselves?

I'd like to share a daily affirmation that helps me stay compassionately present: *Have gratitude for the past, compassion for the present, and faith for the future.* May it be so.
