



Monday, March 27, 2023

Compassion and Well-Being

Scott Stoner

If you want others to be happy, practice compassion.

If you want to be happy, practice compassion.

—Dalai Lama

This week we will focus on the relationship between compassion and well-being. The above quote from the Dalai Lama captures how compassion enhances the well-being of others and ourselves.

Martha Bourlakas reminded us in her writing yesterday of the importance of self-compassion, something we will focus on in other reflections this week. For now, I want to say that caring for our own well-being is essential for our ability to offer kindness and mercy to others.

I love the Prayer of St. Francis because it is a prayer that invites us to be instruments of peace, love, kindness, and compassion in a world that so very much needs all the spiritual nourishment we can give (full prayer on p. 79). As a guitarist, when I read the words *make us an instrument*, I think of how I cannot produce music for others to enjoy if I do not take the time to tune the strings before I play. This always reminds me that I need to regularly keep my well-being in tune so that I am able to offer compassion more easily, which can enhance the well-being of others.

We also know that caring for the suffering of others has a positive impact on *our* own well-being. In his reflection for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, Chris Yaw shared a study that confirms this truth. We are called to love our neighbor *and* ourselves, and keeping a healthy balance between the two is essential to both our well-being, and the well-being of others.

Making it Personal: What are your initial thoughts about the connection between compassion and well-being? How do you recognize if your well-being, your “instrument,” is out of tune? What helps you get back in tune and stay in tune?

Tuesday, March 28, 2023

Clothe Yourself with Compassion

Scott Stoner

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

—Colossians 3:12

Jesus calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves. His call is one of the two great commandments, to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

While Jesus does direct us, as his followers, to do this, we are wise to realize that not only is offering compassion to others central to our faith, but it is also foundational to our well-being.

The practice of compassion is both a fruit of, and a contributor to, well-being. To realize the truth of this, we need only think of a time when our hearts and emotions have been tense, anxious, angry, and constricted. When we feel like this, this is our smaller, ego-based self. And when our smaller self is dominant, it is important to recognize that our well-being is compromised and that we are not in a place to enhance another's well-being.

Now think of a time when your larger, spiritual self was dominant. This is the self that responds from an expanded heart and soul. From this expanded place, as the words of the Scripture above say, we are able to clothe ourselves with “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” We experientially recognize that our well-being, as well as the well-being of others, is truly enhanced when living from this larger, spiritual space.

Just as we can decide how to dress ourselves each day in order to look our best, we can also decide to clothe ourselves with loving actions, including compassion, in order to respond from the heart.

Making it Personal: Read the verse from Colossians above and notice what speaks to you. Can you recognize when your smaller, ego-centered self is activated vs. when your larger, spiritual self is present? What might help you to make a choice to clothe yourself with more compassion each day?



Wednesday, March 29, 2023

The Golden Rule

Robbin Brent

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.

—Matthew 7:12

Karen Armstrong included the Golden Rule found in Matthew in her compelling definition of compassion: “To put ourselves in somebody else’s shoes, to feel her pain as though it were our own, and to enter generously into his point of view. That is why compassion is aptly summed up in the Golden Rule, which asks us to look into our own hearts, discover what gives us pain, and then refuse, under any circumstance whatsoever, to inflict that pain on anybody else.”

Embedded in this definition of compassion and also in the Golden Rule is the wisdom, “we can’t give away what we don’t have.” Both point toward the importance of first knowing how we want to be treated, how we want to be loved. How can we accompany others compassionately if we don’t know that for ourselves? How can we treat others well if we don’t know what it is like to treat ourselves well?

We cannot extend compassion if we don’t first know self-compassion. If we don’t learn what causes us pain and then offering ourselves compassion, we will have a harder time recognizing suffering in another. We will find it challenging to respond with a desire to alleviate their pain if we haven’t first known that desire as a compassionate response toward our own pain.

A practice of self-compassion offers a foundation of stability and well-being that we can count on both in times of struggle and success. From that foundation we can begin to know—as Martha Bourlakas wrote so beautifully about in last Sunday’s reflection—that we, and others, are beloved children of God.

Making it Personal: What do you think of the connection between practicing self-compassion and our ability to offer compassion to another? Between self-compassion and well-being? Have you found that extending compassion toward yourself helped you to be more responsive to the needs of others?

Thursday, March 30, 2023

Be an Encourager

Scott Stoner

Be an encourager. The world has enough critics already.

—Dave Willis

I live in Wisconsin, and one of my favorite rites of spring is getting my bike out and ready for the first outdoor ride of the season. One of the first things I need to do is pump up the tires because most of the air leaks out of them over our long winters.

Have you ever tried to ride a bike with an under-inflated or even a flat tire? If so, you know how hard and bumpy the ride can be and how much effort it takes to get it to move. I think of this as a metaphor for the importance of compassion and encouragement, both for others *and* for ourselves.

To make our travels through life a bit less challenging, all of us can use a little air in our tires, a little extra encouragement, from time to time. Just as the air slowly leaks out of bike tires over a long winter, life itself can deflate us over time and our self-esteem and sense of well-being may suffer. When this happens, expressions of compassion and encouragement, for ourselves and others, can go a long way toward pumping up our emotional “tires.”

Be an encourager. The first three words in the quote above by Dave Willis are so simple that it can be easy to miss their power. Offering encouraging words to your child, partner, friend, colleague, family member, or even to a stranger, is so simple, yet we often can see the positive effects immediately. It’s that easy and that powerful. Our compassion and encouragement might be just the air someone needs to lift them up and make their ride just a little smoother and more manageable. And remember, it is nice to share this same generosity of spirit with oneself.

Making it Personal: How could you be more accepting and encouraging of yourself? Think of something specific. Is there someone in your life who could also use some encouragement right now? Again, think of something specific you could do or say.



Friday, March 31, 2023

Everything Is Connected

Robbin Brent

When we talk about God, we're talking about the very straightforward affirmation that everything has a singular, common source and is infinitely, endlessly, deeply connected.

—Rob Bell

The understanding that everything is connected is foundational to the Living Compass Model for Well-Being. We introduced this on p. 9 with the image of a kinesthetic mobile, describing how, when we touch one area of well-being on the mobile we affect all the other areas. Similarly, as with the spider's web we explored in week one, if we touch one strand, the entire web vibrates.

We've explored the idea of everything being connected throughout the reflections this week. Our ability to recognize and invite in love and care for ourselves is connected to our ability to love and care for others. Once we've experienced the gift of healing and wholeness that accompanies loving mercy and self-compassion, we now have a gift we can share with others. We reflected on how loving others by learning how we want to be loved is connected to deep well-being. And how a practice of compassion enhances our desire for others to be happy, as well as our own desire to be happy.

Everything is connected by the sacred strands in the infinite web of God's love. These sturdy strands include compassion, mercy, intimacy, generosity, virtue, reverence, wisdom, patience, truthfulness, steadfast determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity, all coming from the innermost depths of our being. When we make a commitment to cultivate these and bring them into our relationship with ourselves, with others, and with our planet, we grow and strengthen the kind of compassion that has the power to bless and heal the world.

Making it Personal: What is your response to the idea that everything is interconnected in a sacred web of God's love? Have you experienced the connection between one area of well-being and the other areas described above and illustrated through the mobile on p. 9? What other examples come to mind?

Saturday, April 1, 2023

Saying No—a Compassionate Choice

Jan Kwiatkowski

Self-care is a Divine Responsibility.

—Anonymous

We all have days when practicing compassion comes more effortlessly than on other days. The demands of practicing compassion can sometimes feel overwhelming because the needs in our world are so great. In these overwhelming moments, we bump up against discovering our human limits. We've been taught to give, not count the cost, and to be selfless rather than selfish. Yet if we continue to give at our own expense, we can exhaust ourselves and become resentful, numb, irritable, even depressed. John Pavlovitz describes this as feeling “really tired, marrow-deep, hope-sucking, soul-choking exhausted.”

Not only is it not possible to be selfless all the time, it isn't good for our souls. We live within finite bodies and if we put the needs of others so thoroughly ahead of our own too much of the time, we can do injury to the body, mind, and spirit God gave us. Taking care of others at the expense of our own well-being can keep us from doing the work God calls us to do.

We can learn much from noticing the compassionate choice Jesus made—in the midst of his demanding ministry tending to the great needs in his world—to also take care of himself. Recognizing his dependence on God, we are told that Jesus would withdraw to private places because he needed to pause, pray, and reconnect with the Source of Compassion. He chose to say “no” to others for a short time so he could say “yes” again to living into the will of his Father. Maybe we need to reframe choosing self-care, not as selfishness, but as a humble recognition of our finite self, needing to pause, pray, and reconnect with our Source of Compassion.

Making it Personal: What is your initial response to this reflection? Have there been times when extending compassion to others becomes too much and you became resentful, numb, or soul-choking tired? Where and how are you being nudged to say “no” to others so that you might be more compassionate toward yourself?

Palm Sunday

April 2, 2023

God's Liberating Love

Deborah Woolsey

You must be a world unto yourself and with your difficult thing in your center, drawing you to it. And one day, with its weight, its gravity, it will have its effects beyond you, on a destiny, on a person, on God. Then, when it's ready, God will enter into your difficult thing. And do you know anywhere else where you and God can meet?

—Rainer Maria Rilke

For years people of all walks of life have asked the question: “Why is there suffering?” Societies, individuals, institutions, religions, academic, and scientific disciplines have all attempted to give an answer. Most often suffering is perceived as punishment for bad behavior or the consequence of bad choices.

One of the Latin definitions for *passio* means *suffering* and *com* means *with*. Today, on Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday, the church turns to Jesus for God's response to the question. As we witness Jesus going through the excruciating suffering of the betrayal and abandonment of his friends, a mockery of a trial, physical violence, and death, we are not given a reason for the *why* of suffering, we are given a *who*, someone who loves all of humanity so much they are willing to suffer with us. Jesus does not show us an angry god who desires punishment. He shows us a God who loves us so much that God is willing to suffer with us.

This response is empowering and helpful for me because it liberates me from the shame of judgment and helps me accept suffering as part of life. It also helps me to discern the difference between redemptive and non-redemptive suffering. For example, when I was recovering from two hip replacement surgeries, I went through a long and difficult recovery period. Seeing that time through the lens of Jesus suffering with me helped me recognize and receive the compassion offered by my caregivers, family, and friends who were able to be with me physically, mentally,

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and spiritually. It also helped me respond compassionately to the medical caregivers who were suffering stress exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. By caring for each other we were able to alleviate both our burdens. Even though it might persist, this type of suffering doesn't last forever. It will change, things will get better, even if slowly, and we simply need to keep going, which we can do because we know we are not alone. That is what makes it redemptive, and it is just as true for the other types of suffering that also offer hope for healing change.

However, there are other forms of suffering that do not have a light at the end of the tunnel. Non-redemptive suffering happens when we get stuck in a toxic situation, such as an abusive workplace, school, relationship, any place where there is no compassion and no hope of change. In those circumstances, sometimes the best and most compassionate thing we can do is to distance ourselves from it.

By suffering with us, Jesus embodies how God's love truly is liberating and life-giving. Knowing this, when we suffer we are better able to recognize God's freeing love and, from this place of healing and returning wholeness, be more compassionate with ourselves and others.
