



April 3, 2023

Compassion and Love

Jan Kwiatkowski

I am a child of God. I always carry that with me.

—Maya Angelou

No matter how many times or years I have encountered the Holy Week Scriptures, I continue to find characters I love, don't understand, admire, or even dislike. One of my first memories of the Holy Week story was the distress I felt when hearing a story about terrible things happening to a really good person. I also remember feeling comforted that there were women close by who were with him to the end, even wiping his face with a cloth. At the same time, I was really angry at Peter when he denied him. He didn't do anything to help Jesus.

I also remember somehow knowing that, despite everything, God loved everyone in the Holy Week story. And to this day, my experiences as a pastor, therapist, and hospice chaplain has only deepened this belief in every cell of my being. Every person you or I love, don't understand, admire, or dislike is also a much-loved child of God.

This week, our final week in Lent, we will explore the gifts of compassion and love. Our acts of compassion are one way of reassuring our human brothers and sisters that they are deeply loved. I've found that identifying with a character in a scripture story helps me with my practice of compassion. Despite how I feel about their choices and actions within the story's context, I create a backstory that allows me to give them the benefit of doing the best they could. Transferring that practice to the present, I might tell myself that a driver cut me off because they need to get to the hospital for a family emergency. What might each character in the Holy Week story teach you about practicing compassion with all God's much-loved children, including yourself?

Making it Personal: I invite you to choose a Holy Week character to focus on as you read, pray, and reflect this week. What drew you to choose this particular person? Is there a character you avoided choosing? Reflect on that.

April 4, 2023

A World Upended

Jan Kwiatkowski

We won! We Won! The world turned upside down.

—from the song *Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)*, from the musical *Hamilton*; music and lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda

I love *Hamilton* and have lost count of how many times I've watched it on the Disney channel. I saw the play live when it came to Milwaukee, and my alarm ringtone is *My Shot*. I recall the scene from *Hamilton* where the Revolutionary war was won despite enormous odds. The world seemed as if it had turned upside down. Given that we've all experienced the COVID pandemic, we have a shared sense of what it's like to have our world turned upside down and perhaps feel like we are in survival mode.

The world must have felt like it was turning upside down for the followers of Jesus as they witnessed the events we now call Holy Week. Everything they knew and believed in seemed to be coming apart at the seams. In my professional work and personal life experiences, I have seen that when our worlds seem to be turning upside down and we are in survival mode, loving compassion for ourselves and others is hard to come by. It's also the time compassion and love are most needed.

I'm guessing that most of the people who walked that last week with Jesus felt they were in survival mode and that compassion for self and others was hard to come by. And yet, I see compassion in Simon of Cyrene, who helped carry the cross, the women of Jerusalem who wiped the face of Jesus, and in Jesus' loving compassionate response to them. What might we learn from them or other Holy Week characters about extending compassion and love in a world turned upside down?

Making it Personal: Have there been times in your life when it's been harder to practice compassion than at other times, and what made that so? Were there other events in the Holy Week story that speak to you about compassion? Who is someone this week (include yourself as a choice) who needs a gesture of compassion?



April 5, 2023

Done and Left Undone

Jan Kwiatkowski

But I believe that the desire to please you, does in fact please you.

—Thomas Merton

Most likely you, like I did, started Lent with specific intentions and desires, and then found yourself having to adjust, perhaps letting go of some of your original intentions, or maybe you realized that you took on more than was possible this season. We all have a sense of what we did and were not able to do regarding practicing compassion toward ourselves and others. No matter where we find ourselves at this point, I don't think it matters to Jesus what any of us did or did not accomplish. What matters is that we paid attention as best we could, learned, stayed engaged, and continue to stay engaged in the process of practicing compassion.

At Living Compass we use the metaphor of watering a garden. Whether a community garden or one we cultivate at home, what we water and pay attention to is what will grow. In our gardens we get to see both what flourishes under our careful, loving attention, as well as what suffers from not enough watering.

It helps me to remember that we never 100% get any spiritual practice right. The reality that we sometimes “don't and can't” because we are human can be the perfect opportunity to practice self-compassion. Let us remember to be gentle with ourselves as we pay attention to where we are in our practice of compassion and the next steps we feel ready and inspired to take. Trust that God notices our desires. Trust that compassion and love surround us waking and sleeping, no matter what is done and left undone.

Making it Personal: How has your understanding of compassion evolved this Lenten season? What did you water well in your compassion garden, and what still needs attention? In what way could you extend compassion to yourself as you examine what was done and what was left undone?

Maundy Thursday

April 6, 2023

Living Lent with Compassion

Dawna Wall

And I wonder, particularly in a time where everything seems urgent, what the role of pause and breath is, in this season, to help us gear up for whatever this transformational moment we find ourselves in is.

—Rev. Jen Bailey

Author Joan Didion has written that it's important to keep our old journals so that we “stay on speaking terms with our younger selves.” It's an idea echoed by Pádraig Ó Tuama in his poem *How to ~~Belong~~ Be Alone*: “What you need to do is to remember to talk to yourself between parties” ... because “who you are is such an interesting conversation.” One of the powerful aspects of Holy Week is the opportunity to consider the different selves we meet in the stories unfolding. The faithful, betraying, questioning, affirming, and denying that take place are familiar and sometimes frequent conversations we might have with various parts of our own stories. Sometimes when we're heading into unknown territory—conversations that will be difficult, a diagnosis for which we've been waiting, a journey of one kind or another—we nourish ourselves first, gathering with those we love in person or in blessed memory, and cloak ourselves in love.

The upper room represents a sacred nourishing gathering space because it is there we are reminded that Jesus shares a meal with all who are gathered, expressing how deeply he desires that time of being together. And like that gathering, our coming together with friends and family, or with various versions of ourselves, can sometimes be complicated, dreaded, or anticipated, and our processing of them might continue for days or years as we continue to give thanks for bread received, broken, and shared. The daily bread of questioning and wondering and pondering and grieving, the daily bread of accepting how everything is woven together to form the perfectly imperfect healing that is part of the ongoing work of compassion.

Good Friday

April 7, 2023

Holy Drama

Kyle Oliver

My song is love unknown

My Savior's love to me

Love to the loveless shown

That they might lovely be.

—Samuel Crossman

I have stark childhood memories of going to church on Good Friday. The ministers wore all black. The service was very long. The prayers were very serious. We kneeled for so long my knees hurt. At one point, the priest carried in a cross made of thick, pitted railroad ties. It was truly too heavy for him to carry.

The drama showed us lots of emotions, most of them negative. I took that as a sign that I was supposed to feel a certain way: sad, guilty, *burdened*. I thought the message of the day was something like this: Look at all the suffering we put Jesus through! That *I* put him through. The least we can do is to walk this path with him for a couple hours. Maybe then we'll be grateful for all he endured for us.

None of this is wrong, I suppose. I was right to want to explore, even experience, the emotions of the Good Friday drama for myself, rather than trying to shut them out or push them away. We *should* walk through this day fully open to the impact of the story.

But I don't think I was seeing the whole meaning of that story. Compassion literally means "suffering with," and I *thought* those Good Friday services were telling me that I was supposed to walk *with Jesus*, even suffer with Jesus. I now believe I was getting the message of the day exactly backward. Now I understand a different message, *that he chooses to walk with me*.

Years after those childhood services, a different priest pointed out to me that we read John's story of Jesus's passion on Good Friday precisely

Holy Saturday

April 8, 2023

Close to the Heart

Jan Kwiatkowski

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.

—Luke 24:1 (NIV)

Holding my three-month-old grandson close to my heart on the day we buried my mother, I spoke with the Catholic priest who was to officiate at her service. He had an unexpected conflict after the funeral mass, and we agreed I would lead the graveside burial service for her. My prayer book was always in the car in case of pastoral emergencies. The funeral directors found me a lovely pine branch and a dish to hold the water I would bless for us to use to bless the casket that held my mother's body before it was lowered and covered with dirt.

I cannot begin to describe how much it meant to preside over her burial, to be able to bury my mother while surrounded by the people who loved her most. Afterwards, I stayed at her graveside. I'm one of those who needs to stand present and see hard things through to the end. I needed to see the casket lowered into the grave and the men cover it with the hard clay soil. My sister, sister-in-law, and several nieces saw me standing there and came back to stand with me, to bear witness.

I'm tearing up as I write this. We'd been through a lot in the preceding few months leading up to this moment. Important women standing with me on that difficult day was an indescribably important act of loving compassion. I needed them to be with me as much as they must have needed to come back and stand with me.

I'll often talk with clients who speak the Christian language about how we live out Holy Week many times in our lives. The Holy Week story provides a way for us to think, pray, and act through difficult times in our lives. The story helps us to understand that not only do we experience physical deaths with the promise of resurrection, we also experience

Easter Sunday

April 9, 2023

From Everlasting to Everlasting

The steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.

—Psalm 103:17

On this glorious day of resurrection and profound thanksgiving for the gifts we have received on our shared journey, how can we continue to be instruments of compassion as we share the gift of God's Easter love? How can we help to lessen the amount of suffering in the world?

We now know that *suffering with* doesn't mean we take on another's suffering. It means we connect with it and with the other because we have known it ourselves. We feel with them deeply, and then we do what we can to be a conduit of God's compassionate healing love. While it can seem overwhelming to know where to begin, perhaps the best place to begin is exactly where we are, as we are. We begin in this moment, this day, to pause, to breathe, to be present, to notice, to welcome, and then to turn to God, who hears all cries for help. We open ourselves to receive the gift of God's healing compassion and love, knowing we are never alone.

Now that we know that practicing compassion is always a choice, we continue to cultivate the practice of compassion one choice at a time. It is a daily decision and a commitment to return to our intention to open our entire being to God—not in denial or sublimation of our suffering, but with a faith in the deeper mystery and promise of God's infinite love and faithfulness. Choosing compassion will yield spiritual fruit, offering us emotional and spiritual sustenance in times of grief, upheaval, and uncertainty.

We practice by being present to the movement of the Spirit, to be directly and trustingly present, with ourselves, with others, and with God. It is in the present moment that we are free to listen for our inner life in God. This listening helps us to hear more clearly God's prayer and hope for us, so that our prayer can join God's prayer for us, for others, and for the world.

