

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

#### **1.6.14 Sermon: “On Being Wisely Compassionate”**

Presenter: Rev. Sam Trumbore

Last Saturday, my wife Philomena, our son Andrew and my sister Sue were in the theater district of Manhattan. We were squeezed and jostled by the large crowds on a chilly, late December Saturday afternoon. With the sun, low on the horizon and shining in our eyes, we walked up to Central Park and then back down again, taking in the sights.

In the crush, I remember passing two people asking for money. One was an older man who sat on the cold sidewalk near the street shouting like carnival barker, “Spare change? Need a little help here.” I also remember passing a middle aged woman wearing lots of clothes leaning on the icy stone bricks of a building with a small basket of change next to her. She didn’t look at us or say a word as we passed, I couldn’t tell if she was even awake or not.

I could have stopped and said hello to either of these people and offered them some attention and/or some money. I didn’t. Even though we walked past thousands of people on the streets, I’ve only remembered them, and wondered about their situation. Wondered if I should have paused to offer them at least a little compassion?

I think I was a little more sensitive to these two people because I was mulling over the topic for this service. Religion usually lines up strongly on the side of compassion as a religious obligation, especially for the poor. The Great Commandments to Love God and Neighbor are pillars of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. If I were to take Jesus’ counsel found in the Good Samaritan parable, I would gather them both up and take them to an Inn. Jesus spent a lot of time healing and comforting the outcasts.

The Abrahamic faiths all emphasize the compassionate nature of God. Traditionally, Judaism enumerates God’s thirteen attributes of mercy. Some of these qualities, identified in the book of Exodus, are: compassion before and after a person sins, graciousness when in distress, being slow to anger and forgiving of iniquity, transgressions and sins and pardoning the guilty. Allah’s most repeatedly praised quality in Islam is being merciful and compassionate. Every chapter of the Quran except one starts with Bismillah er-rahman er-rahim, in the name of Allah, most merciful and compassionate.

Eastern religions are no less appreciative of compassion. The Buddha’s attendant Ananda asked him, “Would it be true to say that the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion is a part of our practice?” The Buddha replied, “No. It would not be true to say that the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion is part of our practice. It would be true to say that the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion is all of our practice.”

Because the world religions value compassion so highly, Karen Armstrong used it as the unifier to bring people around the world together creating a Charter For Compassion that I wrote about in my Windows column for January.

Compassion literally means joining with another person's suffering. There are moments when we are spontaneously moved to action when we encounter someone in pain. When Sigrin Newell fell right over there a couple of weeks ago, people rushed to her aid. When Jacqui Williams fell outside a month ago, she was surrounded with care. If we had a big crisis and our members needed food and clothing, you know there would be an outpouring of support. I expect if our neighbors on West and Bradford Streets were suddenly in trouble because of some disaster, we'd be there for them.

This kind of immediate, heartfelt, emotional response seems both natural and good to us ... but ancient Greek and Roman philosophers would not have been so enthusiastic. They would have wanted us to be guided by our reason in our actions rather than by our feelings.

One danger of our compassion being guided by our emotions is in the area of justice, symbolized by a blindfolded woman holding a scale. In a courtroom, the defendant should be convicted or go free based on the evidence not how we feel about the victim or the accused. The defendant may sway us emotionally toward mercy and compassion yet may be clearly guilty and deserve punishment. On the other side, think of the racial bias that leads to the high level of incarceration of people of African descent. Would we want to condone a father or mother taking revenge against those who have harmed a son or daughter? There are good arguments to moderate our compassion with reason.

I had an opportunity to explore this distinction when I briefly served as a chaplain in a Florida hospital as part of a six month pastoral care training. I found it easy to feel compassion for and offer comfort to the patients I visited. Sometimes though, my rational mind interfered. Visiting a severely obese person with congestive heart failure, a heavy smoker with lung cancer or an alcoholic with cirrhosis of the liver could bring up resistance to feeling compassion. Of course, thin people get heart failure, non-smokers get lung cancer and non-drinkers have liver failure too. What I noticed during my hospital visits was my all too human tendency to judge, interfered with my feelings, limiting my willingness to feel another person's suffering.

A woman named Mary had a powerful lesson in what opens and closes the heart to compassion. Her teacher was her seven year old son. She writes:

It was a bitter winter in Wiesbaden, a beautiful but rather stuffy city in Germany. Sebastian and I were visiting my mother. On that particular day – just a week before Christmas – darkness had fallen early. I was hurrying through an underpass to catch the bus home. Suddenly I felt Sebastian tug at my coat sleeve. I looked down.

“What's up?”

“Mum,” he said, “why didn't you give that lady any money?”

I looked back and saw a woman sitting on a threadbare blanket, begging.

“Oh,” I said, shaking my head, “she would most likely use any money I gave her for drugs or alcohol.”

Let me pause here in telling the story to encourage you to turn inward and examine your own response to this situation. How often have you been in the same situation and had those same thoughts. I confess to having that very thought in New York City last weekend. It is a common defense against giving money to people on the street.

In my research this week, I read a challenge to this defense against compassion from white, anti-racist activist Tim Wise. He makes a habit of always giving people money and questions this assumption as a reason not to give. He points out that if an employer suspected that an employee would be getting drunk on the weekend, that employer wouldn't choose to withhold the employee's salary to prevent it. He writes:

... to suggest that one is withholding money from homeless people or beggars "for their own good" is a dishonest and preposterous conceit. If you feel that the poor don't deserve your support because of their presumed moral failings, so be it... If they would just take out your garbage, they might be entitled to your dollar in alms, and the hooch that said dollar might help them obtain. But if they merely beg for it, without first performing some labor, then whether or not they have a drug or alcohol problem, you will be free to presume they have both and refuse to aid them.

Mary's seven year old son didn't presume so. Her story continues:

Sebastian took my hand and looked up imploringly.

"Only someone who is very unhappy would sit in the cold and beg, don't you think?"

I blushed. Then I walked back and gave her some money.

Now, I don't want to make this easy. I wasn't there. I didn't see the woman. She might be a con artist. Maybe she makes 400 Euros a day sitting there looking miserable. I've heard stories about skilled people who do make a lot of money begging and borrowing. And if you don't believe that, I have a guy from Ethiopia I'd like you to meet who needs help with his ten million dollar inheritance.

While I don't believe there are simple answers for when and how to be compassionate to another, I do believe wise guidelines for our compassionate response can help. They can help to unite our head and heart when we are moved by another person's suffering. There are a number of ways our compassion can go wrong and do more harm than good. Those harmful ways are sometimes called "idiot compassion."

One kind of idiot compassion is rejecting the process of identification with the suffering of another person. In this case, the feeling of compassion arises but makes us uncomfortable and we want to make it go away. My first memory of this kind of feeling was during the Nigerian-Biafran War. Seeing pictures of little dark skinned children with swollen bellies and flies on their faces was very disturbing to look at. I was more identified with the feeling of disgust looking at the picture than feeling connected to the suffering child. My giving of money was less for the

food aid and more because I didn't want to see that picture again.

That same discomfort gets stimulated this time of year when many of us get mailings and see ads featuring children with cleft palates. I don't know whether the organization promising to fix their birth defect is a good one or not, but it is an example of charity pornography, using images of suffering to stimulate donations. It works to stimulate giving, but often generates more revulsion than compassion.

Another kind of idiot compassion is being moved by the suffering of another and being willing to help, yet offering what isn't wanted or needed. I remember this from when I cooked breakfast for homeless men sheltered in the Oakland Unitarian Church. Thinking they would like a filling and nutritious breakfast, I made them sausage and eggs. It wasn't long before we got complaints that the food was too high in saturated fat and we didn't have any tofu for the vegetarians. This happens at food pantries too. People donate uncommon foods (I might want to donate sardines, for example, to satisfy my idea that they need essential fatty acids) that many clients of the pantry wouldn't touch. People commonly donate what they want to get rid of rather than what they have learned is needed by these clients.

The last kind of idiot compassion I'll mention is an unawareness of skillful means of helping. In a sense, awareness itself is the core of wise compassion. When we recognize the object of our compassion, the source of the feeling welling up within us, and use our reason to skillfully choose our response, we are much more likely to be effective in making a positive difference. This is an iterative process that incorporates learning from our mistakes. Just the last couple of days, I have fallen short several times when I could have been more compassionate. My commitment is to witness the results of my actions or inactions and to learn from my successes and failures. In the process, I hope to grow a little wiser and increase my motivation to continually deepen that commitment to being loving and compassionate in word and deed. There isn't any perfection to be had in wise compassion, but we can become more skillful and more effective.

The Buddha's First Noble Truth, the troubling presence of a stressful and unsatisfactory component of existence he called dukkha, has always captivated me. Being born sets us up for having sickness, if we're fortunate, growing old, and certainly dying. Sickness, old age, and death are not desirable. Jesus had his way of saying it, "the poor will always be with you." We can have moments of freedom from difficulty but there are burdens of being alive that we all must discover how to live with.

And that shared dilemma of dukkha, is itself the deep root that unites us all and serves as the common concern that fuels our compassion. The more we can recognize that common condition and identify feel our shared reactions to it, the deeper will be our capacity for wise compassion.

Ultimately, we don't have control of the outcome of our compassionate acts. We do have some control however over refining the intention that motivates them. By being wisely compassionate, we can strengthen the social fabric of our worldwide community and connect across boundaries of gender, race, culture, class and ability.

May wise compassion be a vehicle for the holy in me to meet the holy in you. And in that meeting, may our inherent worth and dignity find affirmation in our unity embodying the Spirit of Life that brings us into being.

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