

Homily – Expanding our Compassion

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Linguistic anthropology looks at the use of words in various cultures around the world. You many have heard that the Inuit Eskimos have more than fifty words for snow – fifty words that detail the various stages of melting. This also happens in other cultures. The Hawaiians have more than sixty words for fishing net, and in Scotland, I don’t know the number, but there are many words for foul weather. Perhaps that means here in the Central Coast we should have many words for beautiful weather.

Be that as it may, today I want to look at words for love. There is agape or selfless love, philos for brotherly love, and eros for erotic love. There is also affection, adoration, friendship, tenderness, and feeling. And let’s not forget fondness, warmth, friendliness, care and regard.

Then there is grace, which is unearned love. God will always and unconditionally love us no matter what we do. There is nothing we can do to increase God’s love for us and there is nothing we can do to decrease God’s love for us. That is grace.

And, today I want to talk about the form of love we call compassion.

Compassion is defined as “a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering.” “Compassion literally means “to suffer together.” It is defined as the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another’s suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering.” Notice that last part, there is a call to action, a call to alleviate or relieve the suffering.

Compassion is made up of multiple steps. “First, to have compassion for others you must notice that they are suffering. Second, compassion involves being moved by others’ suffering so that your heart responds to their pain. When this occurs you feel warmth, caring, and the desire to help the suffering person in some way. Having compassion also means that you offer understanding and kindness to others when they fail or make mistakes, rather than judging them harshly. Finally, when you feel compassion for another (rather than mere pity) it means that you realize that suffering, failure and imperfection are part of the shared human experience.”

Our Old Testament reading from the Book of Proverbs shows that those with compassion, those who share their bread with the poor will be blessed. However, this reading says more about those who do not have compassion. They will reap

calamity, and the rod of anger will fail them. And perhaps even worse, the Lord will despoil of life those who are without compassion.

And in our reading from the letter of James we heard, *"If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."*

Once again with compassion there is a call to action. You see a need, and you do something about it.

And in today's Gospel reading, Jesus is called to action. He appears to change his mind and have compassion on the Syrophenician woman and her daughter. He notices her pain and responds by healing the daughter. The same is true later in this same Gospel reading. Jesus notices the pain of the deaf man who had an impediment in his speech. Once again as part of his compassion Jesus heals the man.

I don't think it is new news to any of us that as followers of Jesus and as spiritual beings we are called to have compassion on those we encounter in life.

Karen Armstrong is the author of the book, "Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life. A few years ago we studied this book here at St. Barnabas. According to Karen Armstrong compassion is the basis for all of the world's great religions. Buddhist, Confucius, Hindu, Daoist, Moslem, Jewish and Christian traditions all have compassion at their foundation. They all call those on a spiritual journey to see outside themselves, to recognize the plight of others, and to act upon the need of others. In summary all of the world's spiritual traditions join in the teachings of Jesus. We are to have compassion on others.

Now I have a couple of personal observations about compassion.

First, compassion is very important in my own spiritual journey. My spirituality is deepened when I can have compassion on others and curiously my spirituality is also deepened when I receive compassion from others. I don't wall myself off. I allow others to give compassion to me, and that links us together in our spiritual journeys.

My second observation is that some of you here today have a greater capacity for compassion than I do, and some of you have less of a capacity than I do. We are in different places in our spiritual journeys, and we don't all have the same capacity, and most of the time my goal is to become more like those that have more compassion. Most of the time I want to have more compassion.

Notice I said most of the time. And, I said that because there have been times in my life that I have had compassion fatigue.

“Compassion fatigue, also known as secondary traumatic stress, is a condition characterized by a gradual lessening of compassion over time. It is common among individuals that work directly with trauma victims such as nurses, psychologists, and first responders.... Fatigue sufferers can exhibit several symptoms including hopelessness, a decrease in experiences of pleasure, constant stress and anxiety, sleeplessness or nightmares, and a pervasive negative attitude. Perhaps you recognize times in your own life in which you have had compassion fatigue.

Now, those who study journalism “argue that the media has caused widespread compassion fatigue in society by saturating newspapers and news shows with often decontextualized images and stories of tragedy and suffering. This has caused the public to become cynical, or become resistant to helping people who are suffering.”

In my own life, I have certainly felt the effects of compassion fatigue after watching the news or surfing the internet. I have also gotten compassion fatigue in my professional calling as a priest, but it is almost exclusive to money or more specifically people I have never seen before asking me for money. I don't like to judge these unknown people and their needs. I don't want to evaluate someone's story, so in the past I ended up giving away a lot of money to people and feeling bad about it. People's need for money seemed never ending and when I helped I felt drained rather than lifted. Conversely, when our church can help one of you then my spirits are lifted.

Now in my experience there are a couple of things one can do to help alleviate or lessen compassion fatigue.

Stress reduction practices are effective in preventing and treating compassion fatigue. Taking a break from work, participating in breathing exercises, exercising, and other recreational activities all help reduce the stress associated with compassion fatigue. In addition, establishing clear, professional boundaries and accepting the fact that successful outcomes are not always achievable can limit the effects

In addition there is social self-care. Social support can help one maintain a balance in ones worldview. Maintaining a diverse network of social support, from colleagues to pets, promotes a positive psychological state and can protect against compassion fatigue.

And finally, I think there are ways that we can each increase or expand our capacity for compassion. Karen Armstrong's book, "The Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life" gives us practical things we can do to love more. The twelve steps she suggests begin with "Learn About Compassion," and closes with "Love Your Enemies." In between, she takes up self-love, mindfulness, suffering, sympathetic joy, the limits of our knowledge of others, and "concern for everybody." After all, God loves all. Armstrong shares concrete methods to help us cultivate and expand our capacity for compassion, and provides a reading list to encourage us to "hear one another's narratives." Armstrong teaches us that becoming a compassionate human being is a lifelong project and a journey filled with rewards.

But wait there is more. Later this month we are going to shift our Tuesday morning Bible study class to a new topic. This one will be on the way of love – the seven activities we can do to mirror God's love back out into a world that sorely needs it.

And, we have many opportunities to serve and put our spirituality and compassion into action. The St. Barnabas Thrift Shop is always looking for new volunteers, and yesterday we served meals again at People's Kitchen. On the first Saturday of each month, we provide a healthy lunch to 40-80 outdoor citizens.

So stick around. There are a lot of opportunities to work on various forms of love and in particular on that form of love that we call compassion. I hope you can see that we are focusing on practical things we can do to help us through our spiritual journeys and to help us better mirror God's love back out into the world.