

## **Cup of Compassion** *Lenten Series: Our Cup of Life and Vessels We Hold*

Matthew 10:41-42, Luke 6:36

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*Accepting a messenger of God is as good as being God's messenger. Accepting someone's help is as good as giving someone help. This is a large work I've called you into, but don't be overwhelmed by it. It's best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won't lose out on a thing."*

Matthew 10:41-42 The Message

*Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate.*

*Luke 6:36 Common English Bible*

Compassion. What does it mean to be a compassionate person? How do we fill our cup of life with compassion? What motivates us to be compassionate? How is our PDA mission team an expression of compassion rooted in Christ and biblical understanding?

One of the most helpful books on this is *A Spirituality Named Compassion* by Christian mystic, author and teacher Matthew Fox.

### **Compassion is not pity**

It is not pity in the sense our culture understand pity. It is not feeling sorry for someone, nor is it preoccupation with pain. To reduce compassion to pity is to exclude it from mature experiences. Pity connotes condescension and this condescension implies separateness. There a sense that pity can regard someone not only as one who is suffering or hurting but weak or inferior. There is less participation in sufferings of another in pity than in compassion. So let's not put pity in our cups.

Compassion does not consider a person as weak or inferior. Compassion works from a strength born of awareness of a shared weakness, a shared vulnerability.

### **Compassion is connected to celebration**

What does Matthew Fox mean by that? He says people who are following the ways of Jesus know that compassion operates at the same level as celebration because what is of most important in compassion is the feelings of togetherness. It is this awareness that urges us to rejoice at another's joy (celebration) and to grieve at another's sorrow. Both dimensions, celebration and sorrow, are integral to true compassion.

Here is what I really like. He says that what separates pity from compassion is that it seldom that we would invite someone we had pity on to a party, a celebration. Yet the compassion, passion- with means we would gladly invite someone to our party as we offer compassion.

So let's remember that we can fill our cup of compassion when we care, when we enter into that feeling of vulnerability. That is one of the strengths of PDA. There is a commitment to coming alongside people who have been through disasters. We are not better. PDA listens to what is needed. God of compassion invites us to be a source of help and hope. It some from a place a compassion and it is not pity or condescension.

### **Compassion is not sentimental**

Sometimes our compassion is only on the emotional level. Emotions are not wrong. We need to shed real tears of sadness or feel a lump in our throats when we see or hear about people suffering. We may not react with emotions, but if we do, that is authentic. Fox suggests that if we only react with our emotions, that is not a full expression of compassion. He says too often Christian sentimentalize compassion.

### **Compassion as Doing Works of Mercy**

Biblical compassion resists sentimentalization. In Biblical spirituality the works of mercy are actions. The word for compassion in the Bible is more often a verb than it is a noun or adjective. Compassion is about doing and relieving the pain of others, not merely emoting about it. Fox offers this translation of verses from 1 John

Our love is not to be just words or mere talk, but something real and active.

Works of mercy – feeding, clothing, sheltering, setting free, giving drink, visiting educating, forgiving, comforting, praying.

Jesus makes it clear in so many parables that compassion involves action and not mere sentiment. In his parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus says, "The Samaritan had compassion and went to him and bound his wounds, pouring oil and wine and then set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn and took care of him." (Luke 10:35) For Jesus to define compassion took him an entire story including the activities. Matthew 25 is the parable Jesus tells of what it means to care and do acts of compassion to the least of these.

It is clear that God is loved through the relief of the pain of others. God becomes immanent in this realities of pain. Our works of compassion are works of God-love. God suffers as we suffer. God is relieved as we relieve the pain of another. Do acts of mercy – in person, giving money, cooking a meal, rebuilding a home, and more.

### **Compassion is not private or ego-centric or narcissistic, but public**

Fox challenges us to say that too often in Christian history compassion was limited to family or nation, to people "like us." That limited world view of who God cares about and who we should care about. "The Global Village becomes reduced to myopic experience of one's own nation or family or business or religion." This is a lie. Privatized compassion is wrong. It can be narcissistic and ego-centric. Looking like we care for others, but it is only feeding our own needs and hope for recognition.

We are called to see compassion beyond our circle of friends, family, nation, race, economic status. Not that we act on every appeal, but we have compassion and see that all are connected and all are created by the Source of Love.

So our cup of compassion is available to more than just our small circle. Compassion is public.

### **What does God want of us? How are we to live? How do we fill our cup of compassion?**

Biblical scholar Marcus Borg says that Jesus' message speaks of a way of life grounded in an *imitatio dei*—an imitation of God, a Compassionate God. The imitation of God brings together an image of God and a corresponding ethos (a distinguishing set of beliefs and behavior). It describes what God is like and how we are to live.

People who think of God as a warrior may become warriors themselves, whether in a Christian crusade, a Muslim jihad, or an apocalyptically oriented militia. People who think of God as righteous are likely to emphasize righteousness themselves. People who think God is angry at the world are likely to be angry at the world themselves. Those who think of God as compassionate are likely to emphasize compassion. (Borg)

### **The God of Jesus**

Marcus Borg writes:

“For Jesus, compassion was the central quality of God and the central moral quality of a life centered in God. “Be compassionate as your (Father) is compassionate,” (Luke 6:36) was the response of Jesus. For Jesus compassion was not simply an individual virtue, but a social and political paradigm expressing his alternative vision of human life in community, a vision of life embodied in the movement that came into existence around him.”

The dominant social vision in much of Hebrew society was centered in holiness and purity; the alternative social vision of Jesus was centered in compassion.

We are told in the gospels that compassion was the motivator for Jesus' actions. What made Jesus unique was the unrestrained compassion he felt for the poor and the oppressed. “He was moved with compassion because they were distressed and dejected like sheep without a shepherd.” (Matthew 9: 36)

We are told that compassion was the fire that fueled his healing miracles: “He was moved with compassion for the crowds and healed their sick.” (Matthew 14: 14).

Feeding the hungry crowds: “I have compassion for these people; they have been with me for three days and have nothing to eat.” (Matthew 15:32)

In the healing of a leper: “Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.” (Mark 1:41)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: “Blessed are the compassionate, for they will be shown compassion.” (Matthew 5:7) Usually translated “merciful.” Greek word ἐλεήμων (elleemon) merciful, compassionate. Root word eleos – more than 50 times in NT.

Compassion is expressed in his parables. What made the loving father in the parable different was the excess of love and compassion he felt for his prodigal son. (Luke 15:20) and the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus tells us that the Samaritan helped the wounded man on the road to Jericho. That defined loving your neighbor and compassion.

There is a difference between charity and justice. Charity seeks to heal the wounds, while justice seeks to end the social structures that create wounded people in the first place.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

“We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be beaten and robbed as they make their journey through life. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice that produces beggars needs restructuring.”

Offering a cup of compassion is both. As individuals and a congregation, we seek to help people who need food and shelter and help today, now. And we seek to change the structures that create or contribute to people being unhoused, people being hungry, people losing their homes, people fleeing violence.

PDA is committed to long term recovery, long term compassion in places of disaster and for refugees fleeing violence.

I am hopeful that we take time to be compassionate with ourselves – fill that cup for yourself. Don’t be too quick to fill up someone else’s cup before you fill yours, drink from it. God is with you in the midst of sorrow and worry. Don’t run on empty.

Receiving and giving, pouring out. Discerning together how to be people of compassion. I hope our church is known in our community for many things. I hope one of them is compassion.

How do we fill our cups with compassion?

We remember what compassion is not - not pity, not what we do to feed our ego, no private. As we experiencing the Source of Love, Divine Mystery, God as compassion, we respond in love, compassion, kindness and justice. We care for ourselves. We remember to fill our cups. We are willing to be challenged and wrestle with what we are called to be and do. And trust that we do it together. Amen.

Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith*  
Matthew Fox, *A Spirituality of Compassion*