



Living the Questions: Theme Packet

Each month, our church gathers around a common theme and practice to guide our reflection in worship, education, justice and small groups. This packet provides questions and excerpts to guide personal or group writing or discussion, and serves as the guide for our monthly Sharing Circles. For more info. contact Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer revluke@wbuuc.org or 651.426.2369

Compassion: the practice of opening

October, 2013

QUESTIONS

How can one cultivate compassion?

When have you been transformed by giving or receiving compassion?

What gets in the way of opening to deeper compassion?

What is the relationship between compassion and effective action?

How do you act compassionately in small ways in your everyday life?

QUOTES

“Have a heart that never hardens, a temper that never tires, and a touch that never hurts.”

- Charles Dickens

“If someone is too tired to give you a smile, leave one of your own, because no one needs a smile as much as those who have none to give.”

- Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch

“Compassion is not weakness, and concern for the unfortunate is not socialism.”

- Hubert H. Humphrey

“The purpose of human life is to serve, and to show compassion and the will to help others.”

- Albert Schweitzer

POETRY/LYRICS

From The Appalachian Book of the Dead:

Sunday, September Sunday ... Outdoors,
Like an early page from The Appalachian Book of the Dead,
Sunlight lavishes brilliance on every surface,
Doves settle, surreptitious angels, on tree limb and box branch,
A crow calls, deep in its own darkness,
Something like water ticks on
Just there, beyond the horizon, just there, steady clock ...

Go in fear of abstractions ...

Well, possibly. Meanwhile,
They are the strata our bodies rise through, the sere veins
Our skins rub off on.
For instance, whatever enlightenment there might be
Houses compassion and affection, those two tributaries
That river above our lives,
Whose waters we sense the sense of
late at night, and later still.

Uneasy, suburbanized,
I drift from the lawn chair to the back porch to the dwarf orchard
Testing the grass and border garden.
A stillness, as in the passageways of Paradise,
Bell jars the afternoon.

Leaves, like ex votos, hang hard and shine
Under the endlessness of heaven.
Such skeletal altars, such vacant sanctuary.

It always amazes me
How landscape recalibrates the stations of the dead,
How what we see jacks up
the odd quotient of what we don't see,

How God's breath reconstitutes our walking up and walking down.
(con't...)

First glimpse of autumn, stretched tight and snicked, a bad face lift,
Flicks in and flicks out,
 a virtual reality.
Time to begin the long division.

- Charles Wright

READINGS & EXCERPTS

Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.

- Henri Nouwen

From my own limited experience I have found that the greatest degree of inner tranquility comes from the development of love and compassion. The more we care for the happiness of others, the greater our own sense of well-being becomes. Cultivating a close, warm-hearted feeling for others automatically puts the mind at ease. This helps remove whatever fears or insecurities we may have and gives us the strength to cope with any obstacles we encounter. It is the ultimate source of success in life.

As long as we live in this world we are bound to encounter problems. If, at such times, we lose hope and become discouraged, we diminish our ability to face difficulties. If, on the other hand, we remember that it is not just ourselves but everyone who has to undergo suffering, this more realistic perspective will increase our determination and capacity to overcome troubles. Indeed, with this attitude, each new obstacle can be seen as yet another valuable opportunity to improve our mind!

Thus we can strive gradually to become more compassionate, that is we can develop both genuine sympathy for others' suffering and the will to help remove their pain. As a result, our own serenity and inner strength will increase.

- From the 14th Dalai Lama

From the Charter for Compassion:

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others -even our enemies- is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women ~ to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings -even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

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