



Letting Compassion Flow

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church on July 10, 2022

Luke 10:27-35

I was at my family's cabin over the July 4 weekend, and we were reminiscing about our family's friends when I was a kid. One particular scenario came up I hadn't known about. My best friend Lori had four older brothers who were in my parents' Sunday School class. One day one of the boys came crying to my parents because his parents never ever had a birthday party for the boys, but only had a birthday party for the daughter, my friend Lori. I didn't know that. My parents were in their late twenties at the time and weren't sure what to do about that, so they didn't follow up. This same boy also saved my little sister Julie from drowning in his family's pool. Decades later, this same boy committed suicide. My parents lamented that they had never done anything about what the boy told them. They had felt compassion, but they weren't sure how to act on it, and so they did nothing. Maybe we don't all have a story that extreme, but I'm sure we all have stories about feeling compassion and not acting on it, to our deep later regret.

It turns out that the instinct of compassion and the possibility of helping others is not limited to the human species. Scientists are discovering more and more evidence that the paradigm about competition and survival of the fittest is not the whole truth. For example, there is increasing evidence that trees in a forest act less like individual trees competing for light and more like a superorganism like a beehive or an ant colony. This is true of trees in the same species and sometimes even

across species. They actually communicate and share resources through their roots, and through a vast fungal network that connects them and lives in a symbiotic relationship with them. There is a German forester named Peter Wohlleben who has written a book called *The Inner Life of Trees*. Once he came across what looked like a strangely perfect circle of rocks in the woods, four or five feet across, that turned out to be the remains of a gigantic beech stump. Although it was clear the tree had died 400 or 500 years earlier, when Wohlleben scraped away the surface with his penknife, he found something astonishing: the stump was still green with chlorophyll. The only explanation was that the surrounding beeches were keeping it alive, by pumping sugar to it through the network.¹

We have all seen evidence of what can seem to be surprising benevolence in the natural world. There is the story of a bear who carefully rescued a bird drowning in the lake, or a loon who inexplicably raised its natural enemy, a baby duckling, or the dog who adopted orphan piglets and actually nursed them. There is within us and all life, it seems, both the instinct toward fear and competition and aggression, and also love and compassion and help. We can see these two instincts operating in the story Jesus tells in today's gospel lesson about the Good Samaritan. In it the priest and the levite pass by the naked man bleeding and dying on the road. We aren't told why. We can speculate about fear, about busyness and stress, or whatever else was going on. What we do know beyond any doubt is that they did not allow the instinct of love and compassion to flow. But the Samaritan did. The compassion arises

¹ See also Richard Grant, "Do Trees Talk to Each Other?" in *Smithsonian Magazine* (March 2018), accessed July 10, 2022 at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-whispering-trees-180968084/>

naturally within us if we do not block it or let it die. You can see this if you take a child on a walk in the city and come across someone obviously hungry who is asking for help. The child will usually want to help.

But when we become adults this gets harder. There is so much need in our personal lives and in the life of the world. I myself have had periods of compassion burnout. It's not a great place to be. It's like getting to muscle failure in a workout where the muscle just won't fire anymore until it gets some rest. This may be the reason the lawyer in the parable asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" We want to love God with all our hearts and minds and souls, and to love our neighbors as ourselves, but is there a limit?

As with most things, the answer Jesus gives doesn't seem to reside in the abstract but in the particular. The answer is about whether or not we will allow the natural inner instinct for compassion to flow and be expressed in the specific moment, not in the abstract universal. The Samaritan was connected to the heart, and believed that compassion should be expressed. When he saw the dying man there was only one possible thing to do: to act. Everything else flows from there.

So how do we stay connected to the heart as we mature from childhood to adulthood in the stresses of life? Each of us has our own reasons for why this can be hard. For me it's sometimes been exhaustion, or ignorance, or resentment, or my own woundedness. It's also been the times I have not nurtured my own heart so I'm not paying attention to the compassion that rises from it. Some of you have perhaps heard what is attributed to be an ancient Cherokee legend, which says this:

One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, "My son, the battle is between two "wolves" inside us all. One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego. The other is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth compassion and faith."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: "Which wolf wins?" The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

To feed the heart, to feed love and compassion, is I believe the task before all of us, and it begins by loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. It begins in the solitude of your own inner life with God as you understand God today. It begins with receiving the love of God and healing from the ways you have been hurt, with recovering and tending the fullness of your own soul, with giving mindful attention and time to your heart and to the compassion that arises in it for yourself and others.

It also means spending time with one another, to follow Jesus' Way of Love together, to strengthen and learn with each other. Finally, it means putting ourselves in situations where we encounter the man bleeding on the side of the road. It will mean unlearning speed, distance and innocence, and getting out of silos and into regular open-hearted contact with people whose life experiences are very different from ours. It will mean having courage to act even when it's hard, or uncomfortable, or when we're not sure exactly what to do. When the boy comes to you in Sunday School and shares how hard his home life is, we can search for

something we can do that will make a difference. It will mean trusting that if we do allow compassion to flow from our hearts like children do, our mature adult selves can figure out how to express that in ways that are meaningful and actually helpful and within our reach.

At St. John's, we are seeking to be a demonstration plot, a spiritual incubator where we can practice all these things through following Jesus' Way of Love. We can begin by spending regular time in prayer and meditation, just paying attention and becoming aware of our own hearts beyond the endless chatter of our minds. We can risk vulnerability with each other to give and receive compassion. And we can get close enough to see our neighbors truly, allowing ourselves to be interrupted for the sake of God's purposes in the world, which are always about healing and love. You can do that by volunteering at First Nations Kitchen the second Sunday of every month, like today. You could help with the Afghan refugee family St. John's and St. Luke's / St. James have been sponsoring – the Mirzadas who have six children, who moved to the Twin Cities in February and whom many of us helped to move into their apartment. Their support from the refugee settlement organization is ending on July 15, and they could use help with their rent for the short term as they transition to total independence. If you're willing to help with this, please let me know. You can look for opportunities in your own life to slow down, listen to what's going on in your heart, and get close to people and scenarios you might normally walk right past. You can go with Dianne Pizey to Haiti or with the Corletts to Guatemala. You can start to really see and notice the plants and animals around you as living creatures worthy of your deepest respect. You can vote.

Following Jesus' Way of love, this way of the heart, is not impossible. In the Hebrew scripture reading from today from Deuteronomy, God says to the people, "this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away... the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." We know what we need. It's right here in front of us. God is with us, the Spirit is within and among us, and we can do this. As Heidi once said in a sermon, "God sees more in you than you do. God has plans and a purpose for you."

This week, I'd invite you to sit with today's gospel story of the Good Samaritan, re-read it, pray over it. Then try two things. Try to risk being vulnerable with someone you trust over an issue that is unresolved for you, and allow the love of God to show up through that person for your healing and transformation and wisdom. Then seek an opportunity to come close to someone who is hurting. Don't pass them by. Allow yourself to be interrupted and to suspend judgment and to be moved with compassion. Then take the next step. Ask God for the wisdom and the power to do the next right thing. And do it.

Our way forward is the Way of Jesus, the Way that transcends every human difference of politics and race and gender and orientation and ethnicity and nationality and age and power. Our way forward is grounded in the love of God, love of neighbor, in compassion and mercy and justice. Our way forward is made possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us journey together. Amen.