

LIVING COMPASSION

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Wednesday, Nov. 6, 2024

Alright; you ready?

So tonight I want to talk about your capacity for compassion. And I want to talk about it from two different directions: both going out toward others and it coming back toward you. Because, for some of us, it's part of our spiritual journey to expand our capacity for compassion.

Some of us don't really have as much as we'd like. We've never really experienced as much as we wanted, and we're not always sure how to offer it to others. And so sometimes we miss this piece. And so tonight I want to talk about compassion and the role that compassion has in the healing of our planet.

Coretta Scott King said, "*The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members.*" And this day after the election, we can see this opportunity to show more compassion. As half of our nation is celebrating, and half of our nation is mourning, we can see this need for compassion.

And is compassion a value that you want to demonstrate in your life? Because not everybody wants to demonstrate compassion. Some people think compassion is just kind of a waste of energy; like, there's no room for compassion in our society. When we're living an "eye-for-eye" existence, there's no room for compassion; it doesn't make sense. Why would I waste my time being compassionate?

And the bigger question even is: Where in your life are you being asked to show greater compassion for yourself or for someone else? And how do you live compassion as a regular part of your daily experience?

One of my favorite Scriptures is in Job. It's two; Job 2: 11 through 13:

And Job's three friends ... heard about all the troubles that he was going through. And they set out from their homes to meet together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and to comfort him. And when they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him. And they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and they sprinkled dust on their heads. And then they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. And no one said a word, because they saw how great his suffering was.

And I love that! I mean, I don't love it in a happy way ... but I love it in the depths of emotion that that one paragraph encompasses what it means to be a person of compassion. That they came to their friend in his hour of need. They didn't try to cheer him up. In the beginning, they didn't even try to fix the problem. They see the depths of his sadness, of his grief, of his despair, and all they decide to do is to sit at his side in the dirt for seven days and seven nights so that he doesn't have to grieve alone. So that as he's grieving, he knows that on his right and on his left are men that care about him, and he can feel the full depths of what he's feeling and it is okay with them.

they don't try to encourage him or motivate him or talk him out of the problem, or even tell him, "*It will be okay.*" Or even try to say, "*Well, God has a plan for your life.*" Or they don't even say, "*What did you do to bring upon this situation?*" They just sit with him in silence. In silence. And let him be where he is, and are willing to wait for him to find his way out. It is a huge statement of faith that they allow him to be where he is.

Think about the times in your own life where a friend or family member has been in grief or despair, and how uncomfortable that sometimes can make us. We get so uncomfortable with someone not being

happy that sometimes we want to cheer them up; we want to fix the problem; we want to hurry through this, instead of just being right there where they are, and knowing that they're going to find their way out of it. Knowing that the activity of God is at work in their life; and they are going to find their way out of that despair; and that we have the faith and the trust to sit with them as they go through it.

See, compassion requires that we meet people where they are, not where we want them to be. That we park our agenda and just be with them in a way that affirms -- loudly, clearly -- that *"I love you right here, and that I will sit with you day and night in acknowledgement that what you're going through is absolutely a spiritual process."* We allow ourselves to be in their experience. I want you to hear that. We allow ourselves to be in their experience as a sign of deep love and respect. That we allow ourselves to trust their experience.

There is a need sometimes to alleviate the suffering of others, but there's also a need just to be able to hold them and acknowledge them in their suffering. That our hearts are actually big enough to hold the suffering of another and know that we will be okay.

In my own life ... Most of you know that my wife has had cancer twice over the last 10 years. The first time she had cancer, she went through and did all the things she was supposed to do, and then they gave her this medication that they gave to millions of women to lower hormone levels. And for her, it had a very different effect. It actually fried the coating of her nerves. And the consequence of that was that light and sound were incredibly painful for her. So she spent about 18 months in a dark room.

Now, I don't think that I would ever have been anybody's first pick for a caregiver. I mean, it just wasn't what I do, right? I have many skills, but the idea of cooking and cleaning and taking care of somebody who's living in a dark room for month after month after month wasn't anything that I would ever sign up for. And the difficulty was that, you know, my life still had to go on.

And there were a couple of women who said, *"Well, Richard, while you go do church, I will come and just sit with her."* And they just sat with her. And literally, it made all the difference in the world! They let me go to work, because they would just sit with her. She didn't have to talk. She didn't have to do anything. She could be in her room, and they would just make sure she was okay.

And it may sound like such a small thing, but in my life, it was huge. It was huge! I didn't have to worry about her; I could come to church and know that she was okay.

There was another woman, Katie Williams, who's a member here. She came over one afternoon with a car full of groceries, and she just cooked for hours. And she put everything in little freezer bags, and she just stuffed our freezer with food. And literally, for six weeks, eight weeks afterwards, I could just go to the freezer and put something in a pot of boiling water, and I didn't have to make dinner or lunch or whatever it was.

And she just brought the food in. She didn't ask. She just came in and she had everything she needed. I didn't have to find anything for her. She just made the food, stopped my freezer with it, and when my freezer was full, she left. And thank you did not seem adequate enough.

Compassion announces that another person is important to me, And that I don't want you to suffer alone. If I can fix it, I will. If I can do something to ease your suffering, I will. But I will not let you suffer alone.

Compassion is an act of grace. It is not about even exchanges. Grace is the act of God's unconditional love. And those who have compassion are willing to demonstrate that love in tangible and real ways. The grace is a free gift, because the gift that we have been and it's a gift that we have the ability to receive.

The first stanza of "Amazing Grace"

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!*

You know, in Unity, we oftentimes sing, "*a soul like me,*" but there's moments when we feel that wretched!

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now I'm found;
Was blind, but now I see.*

That's what compassion does. It brings us back, it restores us.

In August 2005, Katrina hit New Orleans. And I knew in my heart that I had to go do something. And I called my friend, Daniel Nahmod, and I said, "*I'm going to Houston.*" Because I don't know if you remember what was happening in New Orleans when the floods came. They just put people on buses. And those buses went in literally in all directions, just to find a place that people could be safe and they could feed them and take care of them. And they just sent people. And sometimes families were even separated. They'd get in different buses -- with the wrong bus -- and they'd end up in very different places. And I just ... it was so heartbreaking, right? It was so heartbreaking to watch that much humanity be dislocated that I knew I had to go do something.

So I called my friend Daniel and I said, "*I'm going to Houston; you want to go?*"

And he goes, "*What are you going do there?*"

I said, "*I'm not really sure. I'm going to pray, I think. And I think if you come, you could sing and I could pray, and I think it might make a difference.*"

And he said, "*Great; I'll be there. I'll meet you in Houston.*"

So, for two days we walked around the Astrodome. If you've never been to the Astrodome, the Astrodome is a gigantic convention center. And the people there were in cots; literally cots. Some were out in the middle, some were tucked away in corners. Some of them had a bag of stuff that they were able to grab from their house. Others had just the clothes on their back. And they literally were just being fed and clothed to the best of their ability in a facility that was never designed for thousands of people.

By the end of the second day, the sewage system had overrun, because it wasn't designed for that many people. People were in outbuildings and at the rodeo fairgrounds, and they were everywhere. And for two days, Daniel and I just walked around and said, "*Can we pray with you or can we sing with you?*" And it wasn't enough, but it's what we had. And it was all we could do.

And so, for two days we just walked and prayed and sang. And Daniel sang every kind of music! Like, he was doing blues; he was doing gospel; he was doing hip hop; he was singing whatever. And he just did as close as he could get to the song, right? Because he was just willing to play whatever they wanted. Because whatever song they wanted is what he wanted to give them, because that music would be enough, hopefully, just to make their day just a little bit better. And no matter how hard or how scared they were, sometimes I just prayed that that prayer was just a little something that would get them through.

So what are the habits that build greater compassion?

The first habit is when we **ALLOW OURSELVES TO FEEL**. You know, many times we're afraid to feel. Many times, we're afraid to feel too much. Many times, we see something on the street or on the news, and it's so overwhelming that we think our heart's going to break, so we just close our heart.

But the first habit is that we let ourselves get connected to feel; to see things; and allow to see how big our heart can expand. To see if we can hold the suffering and the experience of others. Because sometimes what people are going through is hard, and yet our heart can expand to hold the fullness of what they're going through, and that we will actually survive it.

The second habit is when we begin on a regular basis to **MEDITATE ON COMPASSION**. To actually practice watching our heart expand with compassion. We can start with a family member, a friend or a situation and just watch our heart expand to hold more and more love, and to be a channel for more and more love to that person, to that situation.

And we can meditate on compassion, and we can just practice how big can our heart become. Because we have within us the very heart of God, and we can actually allow our heart to expand to become bigger than it's ever been before. And as we meditate and pray on compassion, it actually gives us the strength to embrace life as it is and allow ourselves to be instruments of God's infinite love to the world.

We **can SET AN INTENTION**. Habit number three: set an intention to expand your capacity for compassion.

The renowned meditation teacher Jack Kornfield wrote that setting one's intention is like setting a compass for one's own heart. Our intention helps guide our efforts to be compassionate. It helps us remind us that we are choosing to set a time every day for the practice of compassion. For the practice of compassion.

Habit number four: **REFRAME IT**. When we start to feel compassion overload, it sometimes is very helpful to remind ourselves that, "My heart is greater than this."

Will you say that with me?

[With congregation:] *"My heart is greater than this."*

One more time. Together: [with congregants] *"My heart is greater than this."*

Because sometimes if you don't remind yourself of that, you want to close your eyes and you want to turn away. You don't want to see it. It's so overwhelming. You think, *"Oh, no; I can't embrace that much."* And yet, when we remind ourselves we can actually refrain it -- that my heart is actually bigger than this problem. That I can actually hold this problem in the giant heart that God has given me. And every time we reframe it, we move beyond our fear place into an expanded place of love.

Habit number five: **GET SUPPORT**. See, I think there's a need for us when we get to that place of compassion overload to share that with the people around us. To say, *"Look, this is overwhelming me"* or, *"This is scaring me"* or, *"This is too much; I don't know if I can love this big."* And actually share it with the people around you so that your heart has a place to let go, and trust that somebody else can hold you in that level of compassion as your heart is expanding.

So when we get to that place of compassion overload and we can actually share it and say, *"Instead of shutting my heart down, I want to share this with another human being so that I can release it and expand even further."*

And habit number six -- and maybe the most important, be open to those moments of **COMPASSION FOR YOURSELF**. That if we truly want to be compassionate with others, we have to know how it feels. We have to be able to receive it. And many times, when someone offers us compassion, it's too much. It

feels like too much. It's too kind; it's too loving; it's too overwhelming. And we turn away from it, because when they offer us that compassion, we don't feel worthy of it.

And the whole thing with grace is that: we can never be worthy of grace. Like, love and grace are always bigger than we deserve; always bigger than we work for. But when somebody else -- when we open to that moment of compassion for ourselves, and we receive it and allow ourselves to receive that much compassion -- it inspires us and fills us and makes us able to give it to others in greater and greater and greater ways.

It's literally that I deeply, profoundly remember those moments of compassion that have changed my life. That let me know on the deepest level that I was going to be okay.

And it seems to me the way that we get through this life that is often up and down, tragic and sad, and happy and ecstatic, is that we have to be willing to expand our compassion and expand our tolerance for compassion. That, as we expand, we actually allow ourselves to expand our heart to embrace greater and greater moments.

And tonight, I challenge you, I encourage you, I advise you: Where are you with compassion? Are you comfortable with compassion? Can you give and receive compassion easily and honestly and fully? Or is it something that you shy away from? Is it something that you're willing to grow in your practice of compassion so that you can offer it in greater and greater ways? Or are you kind of done?

See, I believe right now in the world, we need more compassion if we're going to move forward. I think if we're going to change and transform the world, compassion has to be a part of our regular spiritual practice. That compassion really is our ability to embrace each other in the greatest possible way.

So where do you need compassion in your life? And where are you being called to give it to another?

Will you pray with me?

Tonight, we open our minds and hearts to the activity of God. We open our minds and hearts to that infinite love that God is. And it's a free gift; it's unconditional. And we expand our hearts. And there's so much in this world that looks like it will overwhelm us; that will feel too much; that will break; it will destroy us. That the pain of suffering is too great; it's just too big,

And yet, we have the heart of God within us. And so tonight we open our hearts. We open our hearts in greater and greater and greater ways to the infinite love that God is. And in all things we look to God, and all things we give thanks. And so it is.