

THE PRACTICE OF COMPASSION

Proper 29A - Feast of Christ the King - Nov. 20, 2011

Today's Gospel urges us to go & visit those in prison....A pastor just fresh from Bible College, was invited to speak at a chapel service in a prison. He was very excited but being his very first time, he was very nervous as well. He thought hard how to introduce his message. On the day he arrived at the prison, he was greeted by a large group of prisoners waiting to hear him. As the young pastor walked and stood behind the pulpit, he said, 'Good morning. It's so good to see you here!'

At heart of our faith is the practice of compassion, that is, the willingness to be present to & with others who are suffering in some manner. Acting compassionately is not always the choice we make even though we would like to think so. In a famous study by Darley & Batson, 15 seminary students recruited for what they were told was to be a study on religious education. They began experimental procedures in one building and then told to go to another building to continue. One task was to prepare a talk about seminary jobs; the other about the story of the Good Samaritan. Researchers varied the amount of urgency they told the subjects before sending them to the other building & the task they would do when they got there. In one condition they told the subject they were late for the next task, in the other they said they had a few minutes but they should head on over anyway. On the way they encountered a man slumped in an alleyway who moaned and coughed twice as they walked by. Results - The amount of "hurriedness" induced in the subject had a major effect on helping behavior. Overall 40% offered some help to the victim. In low hurry situations, 63% helped, medium hurry 45% and high hurry 10%. There was no correlation between "religious types" and helping behavior. Ironically, a person in a hurry is less likely to help people, even if he is going to speak on the parable of the Good Samaritan. (Some literally stepped over the victim on their way to the next building!). The results seem to show that thinking about norms does not imply that one will act on them.

Maybe the practice of compassion becomes a luxury as the speed of our daily lives increases. The problem is that most of us are living our lives at breakneck speed. We are always in a hurry, always pressured for time, always watching our watches. Here's the main point: unless we are intentional about practicing compassion each day; unless we deliberately cultivate a compassion-oriented consciousness, it is unlikely we will actually act with compassion....no matter how religious we may be, no matter how much we love God. What is the practice of someone who has chosen compassion as the rule of life? Buddhist teachers say that such a practice consists of developing the six perfections in ourselves:

- (1) Giving, (2) Self-Awareness - observation of our own thoughts & behaviors,
- (3) Patience, (4) Energy, (5) Meditation or Prayer, & (6) The Study of Wisdom.

In the ancient Christian tradition, similar practices were known as "*nepsis*" which means "vigilant attention" or "love with clarity." The practice of compassion, like the practice of vigilance, requires that our mind be open & without fixations. It requires moment to moment awareness of our thoughts & deepest motivations. For example, usually, if we experience difficulties in our relationships it is because we have certain ideas about others that we are clinging to. We develop & rehearse negative judgments about the other in our thoughts. We fix the personality of the other in their problematic emotions and reactions; while we identify ourselves with a more positive emotions, with sensitivity, affection, & intellect. Such fixation & judgment prevents us from feeling empathy for the suffering of the other & acting with compassion toward them.

But the practice of compassion is the opposite of negativity, self-righteousness & judgmentalism. It includes exchanging one's "me" for that of another, inviting into oneself all the negativity and pain of another individual, of a group of people, or even of the entire universe, so as to transform it. This practice must not be misunderstood as some sort of transcendental masochism where we "experience" the misery of others. That would serve nothing but to increase our own unhappiness. Instead, it is a "breathing in" of another's pain, but with a special state of mind, which is capable of transforming it. In the tonglen practice of Tibetan Buddhism, one breathes in these negativities without opposing them in any way, thereby freeing one of all fear and aversion. And one breathes out total positivity and well-being, giving the best of oneself, the awakening and compassion, which is the Living One within me.

The Christian tradition is a way of the "Servant," one who takes upon herself the pain, the hurts and injuries of the world so as to transform them. As with tonglen, there is no trace of any morbidity or masochism here. On the contrary, wisdom teaches that the consistent practice of compassion can become the wellspring of our own profound happiness and that of others as well. But it presupposes that we are able to free ourselves of fear of death, suffering, and evil and that we are able to transform these negativities within ourselves. As Christians, this transforming freedom comes primary from trusting the God with whom we have fallen in love. We allow this love & trust to become a new center for our lives, a daily source of love, compassion & empathy for all living beings, especially those who are suffering.

St. Augustine said that "a thing is necessary insofar as it contributes to freeing us from unhappiness and leading us to ultimate peace." Any activity that does not further our own and all others' healing is dispensable, unnecessary. The Greek word "*soteria*," which has become translated as "salvation," actually means "health"-health of being in the largest sense, that is, liberation of being. For St. Augustine, it is the practice of compassion, the practice of extending oneself for the benefit of another, to relieve another's pain & suffering that is the heart of the Christian life. To say, "I am a follower of Jesus," means, "I commit to the daily practice of compassion, to the discipline of serving as a healing presence in the lives of others." AMEN