

Compassion and Judgment

~second in a series~

December 17, 2017

Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones, preaching

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento



Hymns:

#57 “All Beautiful the March of Days”;
“Prayer to Holy Wisdom” (at end of sermon);
#1008 “When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place”

Personal Reflection: Jim Eastman (at end)

Sermon

Today’s sermon is part of a series inspired by the book *12 Steps to a Compassionate Life*, by Karen Armstrong. A gifted scholar and former nun, she writes about the world’s various religious and philosophical traditions—about their different histories and their common features. Compassion is key to all of them. Starting as early as Confucius and the ancient Greeks and extending to Muhammad, the major traditions all have some version of the Golden Rule. *Do unto others as you would have them do to you; do not treat another the way you would not want to be treated.*

For peace to prevail in our troubled world, Armstrong says, it’s up to people *in* religious traditions to practice compassion, embody it, and promote it. She admits, however, that much violence, abuse, greed and power politics are waged

in the name of one religion or another. She says, “You would never know that [compassion] was central to the religious life.” So much harm is wrapped in religious words. She says: “People often don’t want to be compassionate. People want to be right instead.”

This brings me to the topic today: the impulse to judgment. This is not the same as discernment, that wise judgment needed in the face of complex questions or in the courtroom. I mean the personal kind: reacting off the cuff; dismissing, disdain, rejecting or labeling others. Judgment that means turning aside from others, rather than taking the time to consider another’s experience. Being “judgy” is a common habit. For many of us, this habit can be directed inwardly as well: being unkind to yourself, and unfair, writing yourself off as worthless or hopeless—as a failure or a fool. Both kinds of judgment can operate in the same person—indeed, we might be too hard on others because we’re too hard on ourselves. Judgment blocks compassion.

Two months ago somebody asked me, “How many sermons will you give in the series on compassion?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I guess I’ll keep doing it until I’m compassionate.” I admit I don’t always feel it. The word *compassion* hangs out there like a goal to aim for, a place to arrive. Sometimes my heart is nowhere close.

But in reading Armstrong, I’ve realized compassion is not a feeling; it’s a practice; it’s a method. It’s not a condition of the soul, but an intentional choice you make, one situation at a time. If we make a wrong choice, we hope we’ll have more chances to choose compassion in the future. Of course, if you fall out of practice totally, this could take a toll on your sense of peace. Living without compassion could shrink your connection to others.

Though compassion is a part of all religions, it’s not a dogma or a “doctrine that you either agree with or make yourself believe,” Armstrong says¹. She says it’s a method. And if people don’t see compassion taking place, if we don’t witness deeds of generosity, mercy and respect, we could lose faith in it. We could give up on compassion.

Last month I invited you to make a daily review of the times when you saw compassion enacted in the world. I also suggested that you take note where there is a need for more compassion, in the world and in your own dealings with others or with yourself. I hope those daily observations are sources of encouragement and hope.

Armstrong says compassion is the “imaginative act of putting yourself in the place of another.” We have to stop and think – is this the way I’d want to be treated if I were that person? Then we have to choose. We choose whether we treat another with kindness, fairness and patience. The Bible prods people in that direction, saying: *You shall love your God with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.*ⁱⁱ This was a commandment precisely *because* it wasn’t a common practice. It says: choose to go against the impulse to judge, the impulse to reject.

The impulse to judge is natural, of course. Judgment goes all the way back to our evolutionary ancestors. One creature sees another. “What’s that? Will it hurt me? Should I scamper away, or fight it? Sniff, sniff: is it food? I better pounce!” Our survival instincts have tuned us for quick reactions, for snap judgments. Yet in human relations, our judgments can add more pain than they avoid.

Spiritual teachers Fred and Mary Ann Brussat say this: “The practice of compassion increases our capacity to care.... But when you move toward others with compassion, you are likely to bump into some common attitudes [that are] just waiting to close your heart again. The usual suspects are judgment and all its associated ‘isms’: racism, sexism, ageism, classism, and nationalism.”

As the holidays approach, some of you may be heading into family or social situations—and dreading them. Will you will feel trapped into enduring judgy words? Whether it’s politics, religion, gossip, or *what you should be doing with your life*, you don’t want to hear those uncompassionate attitudes.

Then again, it’s so tempting to put others in their place. Maybe you don’t know it, but the others regard *you* as the judgmental one, the one who speaks with disdain of people or opinions you don’t like. Maybe at your gathering, *nobody* shows any curiosity or patience. In the battle at a holiday

dinner, everyone at the table is re-loading and aiming their weapons of words.

If your social or family situation is not like that, but full of respect and care, you are blessed indeed! Can I go home with you? But eventually, in one situation or another of our lives, most of us can’t avoid hearing some harsh and harmful talk. It’s not easy to deflect it and still maintain the practice of compassion. When I hear judgmental or disparaging remarks, my breathing gets shallow. My pulse goes fast. I don’t realize I need to take a deep full breath. Later at home, I think of a “gotcha!” I could have said if I’d been less tense. But if I *had* said it, it would only have escalated the tension instead of increasing compassion.

Sometimes when I hear an unfair judgment, I merely stare in silence. I don’t know what to say, and silence is a good thing. In the face of a mean-spirited remark, this could be the answer, “I don’t know what to say.” Or even, “What you are saying leaves me speechless.”

Karen Armstrong urges us to develop a sensitivity to uncompassionate speech. Notice remarks that are disdainful, judgmental, unkind and false. Point them out. That’s easier said than done while keeping our own hostility in check. Here’s an idea. It seems likely that most people, most of us, would say we want to honor the Golden Rule. When we are speechless in the face of hurtful words, first we can pause to notice what we feel. Then we can decide whether we’ll say how they are coming across to us. “The way you’re talking doesn’t sound like the Golden Rule to me.” Next, we consider asking some questions. Such as: “Why do you say that? Where did you come to think of that? Who told you that? Do you actually know any of the people you’re attacking?”

But we still have the option of staying silent rather than reacting. Silence can be a way of staying present with another person while not returning the hostility they are showing. When we are the ones feeling reactive or judgy, we can take silence and ask ourselves those same questions. We can examine our impulses—and choose whether acting on them would be helpful.

I forget where I first read this advice—maybe on a bumper sticker: “Before operating the mouth, be sure the brain is in gear.” When we’re

feeling an impulse to judgment, silence is a way to put the brain in gear before speaking.

Two weeks ago a few UUSS members and I attended a lecture by the actor B.D. Wong, held at St. Mark's United Methodist. In the 1980s, as a young Chinese American actor, he had small roles that were Asian stereotypes. He heard negative, stereotypical judgments about his acting prospects from directors, agents, critics and patrons. Then he was cast in the Broadway show *M. Butterfly* in 1988. This won him a Tony Award and opened his career to movies, TV series and other plays.

He's also a writer and an activist, especially as an out gay person who is Asian American. B.D. Wong calls for an increased level of discussion among folks of differing experiences and opinions—speaking and listening. Yet in the current political climate, he says, “People have been given permission to say the most terrible things.” His advice: when faced with ignorance or harshness, let's try not to escalate things. For example, when he encounters hostile words, he tries to be humorous, corny, disarming. He says one way to be disarming is... to listen. Another is to ask questions.

At a playwriting workshop, for example, a writer wants others to provide feedback on a script. He said the critiques at a workshop usually come in the form of questions: “What was your intention in putting that in the scene?” Or: “I'm not sure I understand that part of the plot; did you intend for this development to be unclear?” The critiques may not be easy to hear or to say, but they are not intended to be disparaging. Using compassion doesn't mean failing to challenge one another. It doesn't mean you won't feel some heat. It means measuring our words by the Golden Rule.

Author Christina Feldman says this: “Compassion doesn't always call for grand or heroic gestures.... A willingness to step beyond your fears and reactions ... can transform a moment of fear or pain.”ⁱⁱⁱ

After his lecture, B.D. Wong had an extended session of questions and comments from the audience. One woman recalled the days when former Olympic decathlon Gold Medal winner Caitlin Jenner came out in public as a trans woman. The speaker said: “I was playing cards with friends.

One of the women went off about that. She said all kinds of terrible things. I didn't know what to do.”

She could have bolted for the door. She could have screamed at the other person. Instead, she took a long deep breath and looked at her friend. She said: “You have no idea what you are talking about. What you're saying [comes across as] very cruel, and you need to educate yourself.” Then she stopped. She breathed in the silence and allowed what she'd said/ to sink in.

B.D. Wong asked the question we were all wondering: “What did the person do?”

“She got very quiet,” the woman answered. She hadn't let her friend's outburst go unaddressed and then have it bother her for the rest of the day. Instead, this person took a breath, took a risk, and said how the other's words came across to her. She was firm, but she didn't reject the other person's humanity. She didn't call her an idiot (the favorite insult of online comment boards). After pausing to breathe, she pointed out the lack of compassion reflected in that woman's angry tone of judgment.

Christina Feldman says: “Compassion doesn't always call for grand or heroic gestures.” Yet sometimes ordinary courage *is* a heroic gesture. Compassion depends on courage.

On the cover of the order of service is a Bodhisattva figure by the name of Avalokitesvara. In the Buddhist tradition, as I understand it, he embodies the compassion of *all the Buddhas*. Even though he's achieved the pinnacle of enlightenment, he has voluntarily taken one step down from Nirvana in order to care for the rest of humanity—all of us. He wants to liberate us from the suffering we cause and the suffering we feel by our grasping and aversions, by our judgments and reactions, and by our impatience and hostility to ourselves and one another.

Perhaps that's why this Buddhist figure of compassion is depicted with 1,000 arms. He needs those arms to grab hold of every one of us--and *shake some sense into us*. The name Avalokitesvara means a deity who watches over. Perhaps, in his compassion for us and in his love, he uses those arms to give hugs all around, to hug every one of us. It's a nice thought. As a matter of fact, I've read that each of those 1,000 arms holds an eye.

This deity has that many eyes, aiming in all directions, to make sure nothing or nobody is missed. The Compassionate Buddha watches over all of us.

In Chinese Buddhism this figure is a goddess: Kwan Yin, the goddess of compassion. Most of her images have only two arms, but she has gently flowing robes, indicating peace and ease. Like Avalokitesvara, she has given up Nirvana in favor of staying with us, to guide us, keep watch over us, care for us. She notices when we're feeling driven by impulsive judgments and reactions, driven by our fears and cravings. With her calm face, Kwan Yin opens her arms, she wraps us in her robes and nods in understanding of our hurts. She calls us toward serenity and peace. Her warm arms embrace us like a wise elder who has seen it all and who loves us all the same.

If you find yourself in a tense encounter with others, she says: Take a deep breath. Notice what you are feeling. Choose what you might say, and how you might act in this situation. What questions might you ask this person? If you find yourself in a tense encounter with yourself, she says: Take a deep breath. Notice what you are feeling. What questions might you ask yourself?

If you don't own an image of the Bodhisattva of Compassion and you don't pray to one of them, you can be a Bodhisattva for yourself. In a tense encounter, notice if your breathing gets shallow. See if your emotions feel pulled or pushed. Notice if you are judging and wanting to lash out. Notice if you're steaming in silent anger. Recognize if you've gotten hooked. Then, smile at your humanity like a caring mother goddess, or give yourself a good hug even though you don't have 1,000 arms. Take the time to resolve again to pause and consider the Golden Rule as you encounter every situation in the days ahead.

In the days before us, may we strive to keep the heart open, breathe deeply, and make use of silence. As we move one day at a time into the days before us, may we treat other and ourselves in accordance with our highest values. May we feel ourselves deserving to be held in the arms of love, and may we live in that love and in that peace.

May we treat others and the world around us as we would wish to be treated. May respect,

peace, gratitude and generosity be our guides and be our gifts. Let us choose peace, for the sake of our spirits and the good of our world. Amen.

Hymn text: Prayer to Holy Wisdom

(tune: Irby, used for Once in Royal David's City)

Holy Wisdom, touch this hour
With a sweet and solemn joy.
Seal our pledges in a power
Time and change will not destroy.
Faithful servants let us be
Of the truth that makes us free.

Gentle Wonder, feel our yearning
Hungry for a Mother's care.
Guide our longing and our turning
On the journey that we share.
Sing in every broken soul
Of the peace that makes us whole.

Ancient Promise of the ages,
To your justice call us still.
Write our vows on timeless pages,
That we may, with steadfast will
Cherish good, and mend all wrong
In the hope that makes us strong.

Gracious Spirit, seek and find us
When in fear we stand apart.
In the web of living bind us;
Open all creation's heart
To a mercy that restores
All the love that makes us yours.

*Text by the Rev. Kendyl Gibbons.
Tune by Henry John Gauntlett, harmony by
Arthur Henry Mann (see hymn #228).*

Personal Reflection

Coping with Regret by Jim Eastman

Why do I keep doing this? Why do I keep emotionally—sometimes actually yelling at myself when memory of some gaffe I’ve committed pops into my head, no matter how long ago it happened?

One example is from seventh grade when I made cruel remarks to a classmate on more than one occasion about his horribly twisted and stained teeth. I recently shared here some of my own experiences being bullied. Sadly, those experiences showed me how to abuse others.

Oh, I have *many* memories of my stupid mistakes that wait in line to psychically beat me up. They include the time I followed the highway to a town by the lake to meet my sister for an evening party, but realized I missed the turnoff... 50 miles later. I missed the town and the party completely, and learned the next day that my sister was so worried about me that it kept her from enjoying the evening herself. Thank goodness for maps on the cell phone, so I don’t have to actually ask someone for directions.

But then there are all the errors I’ve made over the years while on the clock, mistakes that

others usually wound up paying for, like the bathroom I designed that didn’t meet accessible requirements—a mistake I learned of from the building inspector *after* it was built.

I know I’m not the only one who does things like this. Remembering them wouldn’t hurt so much if I didn’t care about the anger, expense, and inconvenience I cause others. So as I get older and rack up regrets, I’ve learned some lessons.

Whenever I find myself dwelling on my history with such negativity, I say to myself, “Stop. You’ve learned something from this. You’re not the same person now that you were then.” At work, whenever my colleagues or I make a costly error, we turn it into a learning opportunity by openly discussing what went wrong and how we can do better next time.

What still bothers me though, is when I can’t redeem myself. It would be a miracle if I could apologize to my seventh-grade classmate about the awful things I said to him nearly 40 years ago, noting what a disaster own my mouth would be if I didn’t have two rounds of braces and jaw surgery.

As time has changed me to be a better person, I hope my classmate has healed from whatever hurt that I and others in his life have inflicted.

ⁱ Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (New York, 2010: Anchor Books), 113. All quotations from this book or from two TED Talks which Karen Armstrong gave in 2008 and 2009: www.ted.com.

ⁱⁱ Gospel of Mark 12:28-31, Gospel of Matthew 22:36-40, Book of Leviticus 19:9-18.

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+12%3A28-31>

ⁱⁱⁱ Christina Feldman, quoted from her book *Heart of Wisdom, Mind of Calm: Guided Meditations to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice*, at <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com>, accessed December 16, 2017.