

Choosing Compassion

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

February 12, 2017

COMPASSION

becomes real
when we recognize
our shared humanity.

Pema Chodron

READINGS

from *The Book of Qualities*, by J. Ruth Gendler

COURAGE

Courage has roots. She sleeps on a futon on the floor and lives close to the ground. Courage looks you straight in the eye. . . . Courage is not afraid to weep, and she is not afraid to pray, even when she is not sure who she is praying to. When Courage walks, it is clear that she has made the journey from loneliness to solitude. The people who told me she is stern were not lying; they just forgot to mention that she is kind.”

COMPASSION

Compassion speaks with a slight accent. She was a vulnerable child, miserable in school, cold, shy, alert to the pain in the eyes of her sturdier classmates. The other kids teased her about being too sentimental, and for a long time she believed them. In ninth grade she was befriended by Courage. Courage lent Compassion bright sweaters, explained the slang, showed her how to play volleyball, taught her you can love people and not care what they think about you.

from the newly published book *Tears We Cannot Stop – A Sermon to White America*,
by Michael Eric Dyson

Toni Morrison, in her great novel *Beloved*, replaces memory and forgetting with “rememory” and “disremember” to help us think about how, or what, the nation chooses to remember or forget. President Donald Trump chose “Make America Great Again” as his 2016 campaign slogan. It sounded the call to white America to return to simpler, better days. But the golden age of the past is a fiction, a projection of nostalgia that selects what is most comforting to remember. It summons a past that was not great for all; in fact, it is a past that was not great at all, not with racism and sexism clouding the culture. Going back to a time that was great depends on deliberate disremembering.

MEDITATION

Spirit of Life – of vibrant and curious life, spirit of life filled with wonder and awe, curiosity and gratitude.

May we be filled with THIS spirit – this spirit that says reach out! The spirit that says you have capacity. You were born with love to share.

May we be filled with THIS spirit – that reminds us to be kind, to live with the sense of abundance that is not a function of our finances.

May we be filled with THIS spirit – that moves us to the intention that not just we, but all beings might be well.

SERMON

Choosing Compassion

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

The Rev. Bill Sinkford wrote an essay for a meditation manual published by Skinner House Books called *Bless the Imperfect*. I love that title. It is ostensibly a manual for congregational leaders, but accessible to all. His essay is called, “Tolerance for Repetition.”

“We hold a vision of the beloved community,” he says, and goes on to describe how through heartfelt process and conversation our congregations form intentions that help guide our community life. And it becomes the task of the leaders to be the reminders of those intentions, “not only during times of stress,” Sinkford says, “but again and again.”

Here at Theodore Parker Church we embraced the qualifiers for our hope-filled mission of Reaching In and Reaching Out. “We are guided by a shared vision: to nurture and strengthen each other with love, and to promote justice with compassion.” Said even more succinctly: strength with love; justice with compassion. That is our vision, and I am today’s reminder.

It sounds simple enough, doesn’t it? We know, however, the reality is not always so easy. If it were, we would be done by now. But visions take time.

As we are reminded of the words – strength with love, justice with compassion – I am reminded that this congregation has attached itself to a legacy of justice-seeking. Many Unitarian Universalist congregations could say as much, but as it happens this is the only one (so far!) that chose to adopt “Theodore Parker” as its namesake and inspiration. Yes, he served this congregation for nine years, but that was nine years out of a 315-year history. If some amount of time served were the determinant, we could as easily have been called the Ebenezer Thayer Church. He was the first minister to serve us,

after all, for 21 years. Or we could have been the Harold Arnold Church. Rev. Arnold served 35 years from 1913 to 1948, not the longest-serving overall, but the longest in just under 200 years and during the history of not one but two world wars.

The name Theodore Parker represents a particular call, and suggests a particular commitment to the work of justice, with compassion at its right hand. For many years, as we have been rebuilding, literally re-building, our work has focused more inwardly, on the “strength with love” part of our vision, building a strong base of shared community life.

And then – of late – we have been turning more energy towards the justice-seeking part of our vision, putting our toes more boldly in the shared waters outside our doors, and beginning to represent our values more visibly to the world around us.

Here are some of the things we might be feeling: great! Worried. Too slow. Uncertain. About time. It’s too different. It’s scary, but it’s okay.

If you remember the descriptions we heard earlier from Ruth Gendler’s *Book of Qualities*, Compassion – the companion to true justice – is shy, and sentimental. She knows a lot and she is not afraid, BUT it is not until she is joined by Courage that she finds her voice. Courage gives Compassion her color and vividness, and teaches her how to love people no matter what they think in return.

We are talking about compassion this month, about what role it has in who we are becoming as individuals and as a community. Knowing how courage fits in is important, because compassion has to work inwardly as much as it works outwardly. Compassion calls on our courage to be honest with ourselves WHILE it is calling us to see the injustice around us and work on behalf of others. Compassion has to serve to make us whole in here, in our hearts, by requiring us to see our complicity with injustice. Otherwise it is not serving truth. And THAT takes courage – seeing OUR PART means we must have compassion for and hopefulness in our own discomfort, lest we be too willing to avoid it.

Compassion is hard work, and can be painful. It is the essence of empathy. Compassion means we will have to lose something (comfort, familiarity, stability) even as we gain – as Pema Chodron suggests – our shared humanity. And, by the way, this is no small gain.

The vision of justice with compassion is a two-sided coin: on one side, compassion for the other; on the other side, compassion for ourselves. Both can require enormous courage.

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The reading we heard earlier by Michael Dyson from his new book *Tears We Cannot Stop* was a pretty “hearable” reminder that we can’t go back again, right? That we would not want to go back to a time that actually wasn’t “great” the way some like to imagine it was. I wrote a newsletter column in 2004 that had very similar thoughts. It was about the #1 country music hit called “I Miss Mayberry.”

The song said wistfully: “(Well) I miss Mayberry
Sitting on the porch drinking ice-cold Cherry Coke,
Where everything is black and white.
Picking on a six string
Where people pass by and you call them by their first name,
Watching the clouds roll by.”

“Andy and Opi and Aunt Bea were pre-terrorism,” I wrote. “They were pre-global warming and pre-abortion rights, and pre-Abu Ghraib. They were pre-awareness, and wasn’t that wonderful? Who wouldn’t want to go back there?”

Oh, but remember? It never really existed. Life has never been black and white, and the myriad colors we have always lived in has never been quite so fair.” (By Now the Secret’s Out, 2004 – Anne Bancroft)

Similarly, Dyson suggested, “. . . the golden age of the past is a fiction, a projection of nostalgia that selects what is most comforting to remember.”

I assure you that not much else about Dyson’s book is as easy to hear.

“. . . you can barely tolerate any challenge to your thinking on race. I say thinking, my friends, though that is being kind. Many of you hardly think of race. You shield yourselves from what you don’t want to understand.” (p.95)

“What I ask my white students to do, and what I ask of you, my dear friends, is to try, the best you can, to surrender your innocence, to reject the willful denial of history and to live fully in our complicated present with all the discomfort it brings you.” (p. 102)

“Beloved, to be white is to know that you have at your own hand, or by extension, through institutionalized means, the power to take black life with impunity. It’s the power of life and death that gives whiteness its force, its imperative. White life is worth more than black life.

This is why the cry ‘Black Lives Matter’ angers you so greatly, why it is utterly offensive and effortlessly revolutionary. It takes aim at white innocence and insists on uncovering the lie of its neutrality, its naturalness, its normalcy, its normativity.” (p. 104)

Those among us who do not fall into “normative” categories may have better access to this particular argument. To be young, to be able-bodied, to be heterosexual, to be cisgender – these are “normative” in our culture. If we have experienced “other” in any way, we are likely better able to empathize with Dyson’s pain and perspective.

Compassion is not only about justice. We know that. And not all justice issues are specific to race. We know that, as well. Compassion is about reaching out beyond ourselves, beyond our own private experiences of life. It can be terribly difficult to join the company of others – to acknowledge our shared humanity.

Many years ago, a call came into the church I was serving. Normally the administrator would have answered it, but she was elsewhere in the building. It was a congregant who told me she was at the hospital where her husband had just died of a pulmonary embolism. When I joined her in the emergency room not more than ten or fifteen minutes later, she said simply, “I need you to be my witness.” I had not seen death this closely before. I have seen it so many times since. But in that moment, her gentle request helped me immeasurably (can you imagine – her husband had just died and she was helping me) to understand how I could be of use in that moment: to be present with my whole heart, simply – and not so simply – that. To be a witness. It changes you.

Some of you may be familiar with short story-writer Raymond Carver’s poem “Late Fragment.” Carver died prematurely from cancer, having almost died years before that of alcoholism.

“And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth.”

Does it sound odd to say that it is so much easier to sit with the dying or the dead than it is to really feel another living soul’s pain? We will all die. We have that so much in common. And it is the rare exception that one is directly responsible for another’s death.

But lived pain? In that arena, we are all responsible for each other.

Don’t black people want to feel beloved on this earth? Why do we make it so hard?

Like the first time we are witness to anything difficult, it is hard to be a witness to the black experience in this country. It is very hard to be present with our whole hearts. It takes so much courage to be compassionate. And until we are willing to do that, and to give up the comfort of our white selves, nothing is likely to change – at the cost of their lives and our shared humanity.

Am I preaching to the choir? That may be. But just like choirs, some of us sing more loudly than others. And there is always a new way to hear and then sing an old song.

Rachel Kaan wrote a poem in November of 2016, following the election. You may have seen it on the FB circuit. It’s called, “What to Tell the Children.” A few stanzas in she writes,

“Apologize for any prior attempts to teach them denial.
Tell them you were blinded by desire for comfortable numbness.
Express that you had the best of intentions,
That you were working within a broken system,
Where few benefitted at the expense of many,
That you laid low,
Kept to the status quo,
Obediently played your role,
But those days are over, because
Now you know better.”

Strength with love; justice with compassion – which is hard, hard work and takes a lot of courage.

But that is our vision, and I am today’s reminder.

Oh – I hear your sigh . . . we know, we know. And, we are trying. And I know that – and it is good, really good. And every day we are reminded . . . we must keep at it. I have so much hope that at the end of your discerning, later this spring, you will come to consensus on how to publicly proclaim this congregation’s belief that black lives matter. I trust in your desire to live into your legacy. I also know we will need courage to choose the compassion that is beyond where it has been before.

Always, we must take one more step.