HOW CAN WE BECOME MORE COMPASSIONATE?  

(10/05/14)


“But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion when he saw him.”
(Luke 10:33 Jerusalem Bible translation)

Yesterday afternoon Darlene and I attended a performance of the Shen Yun Symphony Orchestra at Symphony Hall. I was drawn to it because the orchestra, which is comprised primarily of Chinese young people in their twenties and thirties, was going to be performing some of their own original music in addition to the music of classical composers like Berlioz, Dvorak, and Puccini. I knew that they would be performing music that was indigenous to their civilization, including what was listed as dance music from the Tibetan plateau.

I confess that it really hurts me when this area, which I love, is described as the Tibetan plateau, a region of central China, instead of as Tibet. But I resolved not to hold this against the young people in the orchestra, who probably weren’t responsible for the Chinese invasion in 1951.

Shen Yun is not just a symphony orchestra; it has a mission. Its mission is to revive 5,000 years of Chinese civilization. I know of no better way to heal the sickness of communism that is poisoning the mind, heart, and soul of the Chinese people than to regain a sense of their rich spiritual history and to restore it.

To promote their culture and its enduring values through music and dance, Shen Yun draws upon the ancient practice of Falun Dafa. Falun Dafa, also known as Falun Gong, is a spiritual path that goes back thousands of years. In recent years, the followers of Falun Dafa have been ruthlessly and viciously persecuted by the Chinese communists. The performance contained several ballads that tell the story of this persecution. I’m quite sure that Shen Yun will not be invited to perform on the Chinese mainland.

And why are these people being persecuted? The followers of Falun Dafa devote their lives to the principles of Zhen (Truthfulness), Ren (Forbearance) and Shan (Compassion). The young people, excellent musicians from around the world, who join this orchestra, vow to follow the practices of this spiritual path. I was deeply touched, not only by the excellence of the performance, but by the realization that there are young people all around the world who are discovering or rediscovering the spiritual path of truthfulness, forbearance, and compassion.
Perhaps some day this will even lead to the reestablishment of Tibetan autonomy if not independence.

Two weeks ago, we noted the great compassion that Jesus felt for those who are sick or possessed with demons. The two feelings that are most characteristic of Jesus are compassion and love. The two are inextricably intertwined.

Last week we noted that the Israelites often experienced the absence or withholding of God’s compassion. Through the prophet Isaiah, God says,

\[
\text{In overflowing wrath for a moment} \\
\text{I hid my face from you}, \\
\text{but with everlasting love} \\
\text{I will have compassion on you.}
\]

God reminds the people of Israel, and perhaps also himself, of how his wrath overcame him at the time of the great flood. He says,

\[
\text{This is like the days of Noah to me:} \\
\text{Just as I swore that the waters of Noah} \\
\text{would never again go over the earth,} \\
\text{so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you} \\
\text{and will not rebuke you.} \\
\text{For the mountains may depart} \\
\text{and the hills be removed,} \\
\text{but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,} \\
\text{and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,} \\
\text{says the Lord, who has compassion on you.}
\]

This covenant of peace is a covenant between God and Israel. In relation to this covenant, God confesses that he has lost his temper with Israel many times in the past, but from now on he promises that he will be compassionate in his dealings with his people.

Jesus tells us that God has moved even more toward the compassionate side of the spectrum than he was at the time of Isaiah. I think Jesus is telling us that God has evolved and is perhaps even still evolving. Jesus tells us that God feels compassion toward us not only when we are faithful to the covenant, but even when we break it. He tells us that God’s compassion for us is like the compassion of the father for the son who wandered from the path. The apostle Paul echoes this theme when he tells us that nothing in heaven or earth can separate us from the love of God that we know through Christ Jesus our Lord.
Jesus not only tells us that God is compassionate; Jesus manifests compassion in his own life. Jesus also tells us that we need to have compassion for one another. He calls us to live a life of compassion. What is this feeling or attitude of compassion to which he calls us? How can we develop this or deepen it both as individuals and as a church?

Some people think that psychotherapists give advice to their clients; that we tell them what to do. At our best we don’t, because advice is cheap and because the therapist doesn’t have to live with the consequences. The client has to make the decision because he/she is the one who has to live with the consequences, who has to pay the price. And, as we well know, every decision has a price.

If we psychotherapists just gave advice, and if clients would take our advice, we could straighten everyone out very quickly. I would tell abusive parents to be more loving and sensitive. I would tell alcoholics to stop drinking, and I would tell people who worry too much to stop worrying. There are a lot of people whom I would tell to grow up. My client would take the advice, thank me, implement it in his/her life, and be happy.

However, it is not this easy. Psychotherapists try to help clients understand why they feel the way they do, why they act the way they do. For example, if a mother is impatient with her child, it may be because of the mother’s unrealistic expectations. She may want the child to be perfect to make her look like a good mother, to bolster her low self-esteem. You can’t just tell a mother to be more patient. Well, I guess you can, but it doesn’t do any good, and it will make the mother feel guilty when she can’t do it. You have to help the mother understand why it is difficult for her to be the kind of mother she wants to be. Then the mother can begin to work to change, not the child, but herself.

Religions, and even pastors, however, are not shy about giving advice. Our religion tells us what we should feel and what we should do, as if this is all we need to know. For example, the Bible tells us to be more loving. It tells us we should forgive. But, as we know, it isn’t this easy. I can’t just decide to become more loving because the Bible tells me to do this. What I can do is work on the reasons why I am unable to feel or show love. I also can’t just make up my mind to forgive. Forgiveness is a process. If I understand and work on the process, I may be able to experience genuine forgiveness.
Jesus tells us we should have the kind of compassion that the Samaritan showed to the man who was beaten by robbers. We know that this would be a better world if we could feel and show compassion for each other. We know we would have better marriages. We would have less hunger, less exploitation, and fewer wars. But how can we do this?

We might begin by understanding where compassion falls along a spectrum of emotions. On the opposite end of the spectrum from compassion is probably hatred. Next comes cold distance or detachment. You could probably make a case that detachment is even further away from love and compassion than hatred, because in hatred we are very strongly connected to the person whom we hate, though in a negative way. Anyway, after cold detachment or indifference comes interest. Then comes understanding. Then sympathy. Then empathy. Then compassion. And then love.

Empathy is at the heart of both compassion and love. Empathy is more than understanding, though understanding is essential to empathy. Empathy means to feel or experience what another person is feeling from the inside of that person, not from a position of safe detachment. By the way, I am sorry that the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible often replaces the word “compassion” with the word “pity.” I don’t think they are the same. Pity is more detached than compassion.

Here is a place where we can start. If we want to be more compassionate and more loving, we can begin by developing empathy. In empathy we find and affirm that which we have in common with the other person. This serves to close or at least narrow the gap between us. It helps us avoid being detached or even judgmental.

The Dalai Lama, in *The Art of Happiness*, says we should begin by realizing that all sentient beings want and deserve to be happy. They have hopes, wishes, and dreams for their lives just as we do. Some people are just misguided in the way they go about seeking happiness. They may believe that happiness is a function or reflection of fortuitous outer circumstances. They may believe that the way to be happy is to control other people. They may mistake happiness for pleasure. Silly people! Oh, wait! We do that, too!

So we are a lot like people who make “bad choices,” even destructive choices. When we undertake a fearless and searching self-inventory, we will discover how much we have in
common. This realization is the beginning of that sense of sympathetic caring connectedness that we call empathy. And empathy is at the heart of compassion and love.

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus challenges the categories we construct to keep people at a distance, categories that mitigate the compassionate connection that he would have us feel, that should guide our relationships with others.

Note that Jesus has a person of a different nation, a different religion manifest compassion for the man who was beaten by robbers. One would expect a Jew to have compassion for a Jew, for they have a common bond. One would not, however, expect a Samaritan to have compassion for a Jew. In order for the Samaritan to do this, he had to not only understand and feel sorry for the man who was beaten, but also put himself in the man’s shoes, experience what the man was feeling from the inside. Then he experienced a compassion that found expression in concrete acts of mercy.

We can become more compassionate. It starts with putting ourselves in the shoes of the other person and feeling their feelings from the inside. It begins with the conviction that all God’s children, all sentient beings, deserve to be happy, to be free from needless suffering. It then calls us to respond to those in need as we would have others respond to us.

When we feel this deep compassion and manifest it in our lives as individuals and as a Christian church, we are not only seeing through the eyes of Jesus, we have actually taken on his heart. When we do this, we will be living the kind of loving life that Jesus lived and that he calls us to live.

_A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson_  
_The First Community Church of Southborough_  
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