

“Living into Compassion”
March 7, 2021

Isaiah 49:8-18
Matthew 9:35-10:1, 5

The season of Lent gives us the opportunity to think about our spiritual life as we live it in the presence of other people and before a God whose mercy is great and whose love never ceases. Yes, we can do this at any time of the year, but often we don’t—so it helps to set aside a time such as this. If the season of Lent didn’t exist, we would need to invent it—and really that’s what people much like us—worried and weary—people much like us did over several centuries, slowing expanding this time of Easter preparation to around 40 days.

The late John Gardner, a UI graduate and my *second-favorite* novelist, wrote about what New Englanders call “unlocking time” in his novel *October Light*. These are the days when the world “unlocks”—when the dirt back roads turn to mud, when the river ice lets loose, when the world begins to thaw. It happens in Iowa as much as in New England. The days of Lent remind us of the “unlocking” that occurs in the life of faith—a thaw that can occur in us at any time of year.

I was thinking about this the other day as I drove around town, looking at the piles of old snow, noting the markedly erratic driving that seems to accompany these days as people let loose of the caution and restrictions that cold and ice and snow have imposed on us. It occurred to me that we are now living in a pandemic thaw. Texas and Mississippi have been getting all the attention lately, but our governor was ahead of the curve in February when, throwing caution to the late winter winds, she lifted Iowa’s mask mandate, saying, “We know what we need to do and it doesn’t require a government mandate to do it.”

I’m not so sure.

One report tells us that when the Iowa’s mask mandate was lifted in February, it only took one day for customers to begin walking into the Manhattan Deli in Des Moines without a mask. When the owner, Carey Hansen, asked customers to put on a mask, they told her the governor no longer required them to do so. She countered, telling them that her shop required it, but the only backing she has now is the printed sign on her door, stating masks are required to enter. Hansen said: “It felt really nice to just have it be a universal expectation that masks should be worn. And unfortunately, that’s been completely undone this week here in Iowa.”¹

Pandemic thaw.

We move toward Easter a year into the pandemic. We are weary from all that we’ve been through and all that we are still going through. We are worried about the changes in our lives once more as we start to open up, worried about what the “normal” that we might return to will actually look like. “The good people of Iowa,” as our governor likes to call us, have, like the rest of the nation, succumbed to indifference, apathy, and self-interest. We’ve released our own “inner Neanderthal,” as the president might say.

This Lent, then, we need to let go of indifference that we might live into compassion.

The Hebrew people spoke of *rahamim*, their word for mercy, for compassion, that derives from a word meaning “womb.” *Rahamim* evokes a sense of a mother’s deep love for her child. The prophet Isaiah imagines God speaking to the people and asking: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?” It’s a rhetorical question, of course, and the assumed answer is “No.” And even as we start to think of exceptions, through Isaiah God continues: “Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”

God’s love is like this. Through this motherly love, the God of compassion remembers those cut off in exile, remembers the poor and the hungry, remembers those on the margins whom polite society would like to forget—and, yes, remembers even people like us.

To live into that compassion, consider again those words from the Gospel of Matthew that we heard this morning.

The ministry of Jesus incarnates the compassion of God. Confronted with human sickness and suffering, Jesus reaches out, heals, teaches, and feeds. His compassion leads him to bring to other human beings the wholeness that we seek, the wholeness that God desires for all creation.

Look at Jesus as he goes from town to town. Seeing the crowds of people, he has compassion for them because they are—as we are—like sheep without a shepherd. They are harassed and helpless—and a more vivid translation pictures them “wounded and lying exhausted.”

At those times when we are wandering and lost, ground down by living or by the often soul-crushing news that we hear—that is to say, at times like this—God looks upon us still with mercy from the very womb of the life giving God.

Let us, then, release the indifference and apathy that we have been holding onto in order to get through these days. Let us once more welcome God’s deep compassion into our lives.

And welcoming that compassion, let us in turn be those who carry that same compassion into the world.

Looking at the harassed and helpless crowds, Jesus gathers his disciples—that is, those who have been taught, those who have been following along for a while now—and he sends *them* out.

That is troubling because it means that it’s up to us.

At the same time, it is empowering because it means—well, it means that it’s up to us.

You might think that if someone were to be sent to harassed and helpless people, it would be someone other than you or me—especially at this time. I can think of all sorts of better candidates for the job. We have our own problems. We, too, are beset and besieged.

And yet, this is what we hear: “Go.”

“Go,” Jesus says.

God sends the most unlikely people:

Those who are hopeless;

those who are weary;

those who are afraid;

really, people like you and me.

In our deepest discontent, when we are least satisfied with life as it is, when the pain of the present is finally too much we hear the simple but straightforward call: “Go.”

When we look at this city, this nation, this world—when “compassion fatigue” looms at the edges of suffering—at just such times we, too, hear “Go.”

“Go,” Jesus says. “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.”

We shouldn’t let those first-century specifics become rigid requirements. These are actions that bring God’s wholeness to the world. These are actions that show God’s compassion. They are signs that the living God is establishing a new realm in the midst of a broken, decaying, and dying world. You can think of similar actions that you might take in the twenty-first century.

And this is the point.

Many voices are ready to say that God has abandoned this world and so it doesn’t really matter what we do: we can structure our economy and our society to let the ranks of the poor and homeless swell in our city, state, nation, and world as long as our comfort is assured; we can continue to follow the path of ecological destruction for the sake of just such an economy; we can take off those masks.

From Jesus we hear just the opposite. Not only has God not abandoned this world, God is drawing nearer than we would have expected. So, what we do matters. How we act matters now and it matters for the realm of heaven that is being established on earth.

By our actions we can be signs to the world of a new way, signs to the world of God’s compassion. The followers of Christ are sent into the world.

And this is the good news—as much as it is also surprising news—you are one of those sent followers—in wisdom and in peace, a sign to this world of God’s compassion.

¹ ABC News. “States Risk Repeating Last Summer’s Mistakes in Reopening,” Feb. 14, 201.
<https://abcnews.go.com/Health/states-risk-repeating-summer-mistakes-reopening/story?id=75854757>