

“The Cure for Compassion Fatigue”  
March 19, 2023

Ecclesiastes 9:7-10  
Galatians 6:7-10

About a month ago, I received an email from Tim Strang—and he told me that I could tell you about this; you know by now that I don’t go around mentioning names and talking about emails or conversations without permission.

Tim had a suggestion.

Tim said that he thought “nearly everyone is full of anxiety due to information overload. The sheer volume of horrid news that pelts everyone on a daily basis is simply too much to absorb.” He added that “I really don’t feel we are built or designed to process the extreme amount of bad news that has become a daily cycle.”

I agree with Tim.

As he put it: “200 years ago, when an earthquake devastated a city on the other side of the world killing tens of thousands of people, homesteaders in a cabin in a forest in Kentucky never heard about it. And if some vicious warlord ruthlessly butchered thousands of his adversaries, no one living in a little house on the prairie in Nebraska ever heard about it.

“Today, we are instantly privy to every terrible piece of news that happens anywhere in the world. It’s causing most, if not all, of us to suffer from *compassion fatigue*.” And, Tim concluded, “Compassion Fatigue” “just might make a good sermon title.”

Well, I came up with a slightly different title—but all of this does make for a good sermon topic, and, I hope, for a good sermon as well.

Compassion fatigue is a good topic for a sermon because, well, because we *are* worn out; because every time you turn on the TV or check your news feed, you hear or read about disasters, devastation, gun violence, war, and hunger.

And what happens when you come to worship? As often as not you hear about disasters, devastation, gun violence, war, and hunger.

Maybe *that* problem originates with me. My faith is in the God who was incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth—entering into our world and calling us to lives of compassion in this world. So, it’s hard for me to make much sense of Christianity without reference to life as we encounter it—even when the news is bad and leaves us exhausted.

Maybe that problem originates in our Congregational tradition. We are not people who “turn aside” from the hurting world. Our heroes of faith did not hesitate to face the evil in the world and to work for the good.

Or maybe that problem originates with you—the faithful people of this congregation who keep on talking to me about disasters and wars and hunger, expressing sadness, concern, outrage and hope—yes, even hope, especially hope.

Whatever the reason we keep hearing about troubling events in worship, we are weary, fatigued.

As we look for ways to renew our strength, it might help to understand the nature of this thing we call compassion.

The Hebrew people spoke of *rahamim*, their word for compassion, that derives from a word meaning “womb.” *Rahamim* evokes a sense of a mother’s deep love for her child.

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

The ministry of Jesus incarnated this compassion of God. Confronted with human sickness and suffering, Jesus reached out, healed, taught, and fed. His brought to other human beings the wholeness that we seek, the wholeness that God desires for all creation.

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 these—God looks upon us still with compassion from the very womb of the life-giving God.

Which is all well and good—but we *are* tired.

And this, apparently, is nothing new.

We hear Paul encouraging those early Christians in Galatia: “Let us not become weary in doing good.” A newer translation puts it more directly: “Let’s not allow ourselves to *get fatigued* in doing good.” Paul’s encouragement wouldn’t have been necessary if everyone were always up and ready to get going, would it?

But they weren’t.

And we aren’t.

So, what’s the cure for compassion fatigue?

Death.

I was going to title my sermon: “Death—The Cure for Compassion Fatigue,” but that seemed a little too harshly honest. I wasn’t sure if anyone who saw a title like that in advance would show up this morning.

If you wanted something easier to take and less honest you could have stayed home and simply googled “How do I get over compassion fatigue?” You would be told things like: Practice self-care. Set emotional boundaries. Keep a journal. Engage in outside hobbies. Blah, blah, blah.

Instead of googling, you came to worship.

Instead of self-help, you are looking for gospel—good news.

Instead of simple solutions, you are looking for wisdom.

And the wisdom that we hear from Ecclesiastes this morning gives us a bracing truth: Death. Death is the cure for compassion fatigue.

Or, if not death, at least the awareness of death.

Shortly before the lesson we heard, Ecclesiastes tells us; “Whoever is joined with all the living has hope.” You and I are joined with all the living. Because we are alive, as difficult and challenging as our lives may be, at each moment our lives are also occasions of hope. As fatigued as we might feel, we can still be people of hope, simply because we are alive.

Yes, there are days when we feel so worn out, so weary with the bad news even as we seek the good. We need to be reminded to eat with enjoyment and drink with a merry heart. We need to be reminded to enjoy life with those whom we love dearly. We need to be reminded to do all that we do with all of our might.

And here’s the thing: we should do *all of this* because there will be a time when we can do *none* of this. Death comes and there will be no work, no thought, no knowledge. Death comes and there will be neither compassion nor fatigue.

So, Ecclesiastes tells us, get on with it and live with enjoyment and delight *and* compassion.

This seems to be Paul’s understanding of our situation as well. When he writes: “Whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all,” what he means is “While the opportunity *remains*, let us seize the moment to do good.”<sup>1</sup> There is a note of urgency here, a sense that time is running out.

Time is running out for all of us.

We are invited, then, to release the indifference and apathy that we turn to in order to get through these days. We are invited to shake off the fatigue and run the race.

We are invited first of all to welcome God’s deep compassion into our lives that we might be renewed in our living before we die.

And welcoming that compassion, we might still be those who carry that same compassion into the world.

We might start here, working for the good of what Paul calls “the family of faith.” Soon, however, the ripples expand and we start to see more than we did at the start. While we seek to love one another in this congregation, we know that our real calling is not so sectarian and limited. As far as we are able, we work for the good of all: the homeless on the Ped Mall, the hungry begging on our streets, victims of natural disasters, the hungry, the broken, victims of human hatred and discrimination.

When Tim sent me his suggestion for a sermon about compassion fatigue, I thought: “This is good, but right now I’m working on a series of sermons about wisdom for Lent. I’ll get to this later.”

Then on the last Sunday in February, the first Sunday of Lent, I was getting ready to hand out those One Great Hour of Sharing banks to the children of our church. As I sat up here during the offering, I was holding one of the banks. I hadn't really paid attention to the banks and I was absent-mindedly looking at words on the bank. They were upside down, so it took a few moments for me to see those challenging words of Paul to the Galatians: "So let's not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good."

Right then Tim's suggestion took on a new urgency.

We do get tired. We experience compassion fatigue. But we have others who can help us when we are down so that we can help others when they are down. This is why a congregation—*our congregation*—is so important. We keep encouraging a liberal spirit and generosity in one another so that we might seize on the opportunities to work for the good of all.

There is some wisdom here for Lent this year.

Will we solve all the problems? Of course not.

Then again, we are called not to be solutions, but to be signs of that God has come near—to point to what is happening all around us.

Several centuries ago, when Lent was observed with more fasting and penitence than it is today, this fourth Sunday of Lent was referred to as "Refreshment Sunday." It was a little celebration in the midst of the strictures of the season. It was a day on which the Lenten disciplines would be relaxed.

Refreshment Sunday. I like that name.

We Congregationalists have never been all that big on special seasons and days. In the simplicity that is one of our hallmarks, we regard each Sunday as a little Easter, a weekly celebration of the resurrection. Still, I confess that I like the idea of Refreshment Sunday. I think that all us can use a day like that, even if Lent is no longer marked by the rigor with which it was once observed by some. We can use a time to let up on ourselves, to turn our hearts and our lives once more toward the God from whom all blessings flow, to be renewed for lives of hope.

There is refreshment for all of us, at all times, not just in these late-winter, early-spring Lenten days.

There is God's refreshing compassion for all of us, all of our days.

Death will come.

Even then we will be held in God's love that is eternal.

Until then, let us continue to take the opportunities given to us to work for the good of all.

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians, NIB, pg. 337