

July 5, Compassion

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Bold=skip at 8am

Today's Psalm begins, "The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and of great kindness. The Lord is loving to everyone and his compassion is over all his works."

In the gospel, Jesus uses an analogy of children role-playing a wedding to contrast himself to John the Baptist. John was an ascetic, but they rejected him because of his way of life. But when Jesus took a more cordial approach with his followers, he was called a glutton and a drunk -- a friend of tax collectors and sinners. I want to break this down a bit and explain how these two passages connect.

In Jesus's time, there was a purity system. Several times in Leviticus, there is a mandate, "be ye holy for I

the LORD am holy.” Holiness for Jews then as well as more Orthodox Jews today was about purity. Touching a dead body would render you impure, **which is probably why the people in the parable of the Good Samaritan would have passed by the man on the side of the road; if he was already dead, they would’ve been impure for having touched him.** People with illnesses were impure. Women on their period were considered impure for seven days, so a quarter of the month! Anyone coming into contact with them was also impure. Giving birth would render the mother impure. Certain professions, like tax collectors, were impure. Eating certain animals, like shellfish or especially pork, was impure. Leviticus 11 starts with that command, “Be ye holy as I the LORD am holy,” and goes on to talk about what foods you can’t eat.

There were also rules about who you could and could not eat with. You couldn’t eat with women. You couldn’t eat with Gentiles -- that’s anyone who wasn’t

Jewish -- and Paul respectfully called out Peter for his hypocrisy concerning that rule.

You couldn't eat with people considered impure. It might seem mundane to us -- and it should since our society today is more egalitarian -- but eating with someone implied that you considered them ritually pure and that you viewed them as equal. This is where Jesus gets into trouble. He ate with women and tax collectors *to show* that he viewed them as equals. He went up to a man with demons who lived in the vicinity of pigs. He hugged a man with leprosy.

Jesus saw the superficiality of this paradigm and he advocated for a new paradigm -- not built on purity standards -- but rather on compassion.

So whereas in the Torah it says "Be ye holy as God is holy," in Luke 6:36, Jesus says "Be compassionate, just as your Father in heaven is compassionate." The historical understanding was that the defining

characteristic of God which we are to emulate was holiness which was practiced by purity. Jesus understood God's defining characteristic for us to emulate as being LOVE, which is practiced by COMPASSION.

Jesus taught that through the parable of the Good Samaritan. He understood that being compassionate for someone in their time of need such as his parabolic character who was attacked by robbers was more important than potentially being rendered impure by touching a dead body.

Jesus also practiced this compassion. He understood that hugging someone with a disease and showing them 'pure affection' as the collect says, was more important than the impurity of touching them. He understood that we are all equal -- black and white, female and male, gay and straight. He shared many meals with all different kinds of people to show that he viewed them as his equals. **Many of you have commented that one of the things you missed**

most about coming to church each week was the Eucharist. That's what the Eucharist is: it's us with Jesus and with believers past, present, and future affirming that we are all the same in God's sight. We're all precious in God's eyes.

Many Christian churches today carry on with the purity standards. Their attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bi, and trans folks is evidence of that.

They view different sexual orientations and gender identities as impure because to them it just messes up the order of things. But in viewing this group and other groups that way, they're missing the whole point of Jesus's message, which was also articulated by Paul and others in the Bible. You could follow every single purity rule in the Torah, but if you don't put your love into action by showing compassion to others, none of that matters.

Don't believe me? In one story in the Bible, St Phillip was talking to a eunuch. Y'all know what a eunuch is, right? 😂😂😂 Well because they were lacking in a certain department, they were permanently impure. And they were Gentiles -- again, impure. And we think that they were probably often same-gender-loving,

which in itself wasn't seen as impure in those days but was commonly associated with paganism in the minds of observers of Judaism.

And the eunuch in the New Testament was black. The eunuch asks Phillip what was to prevent him from being baptized, knowing full well the answer he *expected* to hear. And for Phillip to touch him would've made Phillip impure. But Phillip baptized him anyway because God is way more concerned with

compassion than ritual purity. That doesn't mean we can do whatever we want and that there are no rules we should follow, but it does mean we don't have to follow a bunch of rules just for the sake of following them. Instead, we should follow the rule of loving one another and practicing that love through compassion.

My friends, as this nation continues to reel from instance after instance of executions of black people, those of you who are white have to make a choice. You can show compassion for those pleading for life and tranquility, or not. But you cannot be neutral. If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you've chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant is standing on a mouse's tail and you say you're neutral, the mouse won't like that. I've listened to many peoples' reactions to what is happening in this country, including some of you. And I can't help but notice that many seemed preoccupied by the initial rioting and looting, but where were all of you when we were peacefully

kneeling? We didn't get to this point overnight. It took decades of not listening. It's as Jesus said: they look, but do not see, and they hear, but do not listen or understand. Rayshard Brooks and Breonna Taylor were both younger than I am.

People of color are out in the streets protesting because it could've been any of us. The modest reforms offered have not worked, and people continue to die. They haven't worked because the system itself was founded on racism. Police forces were first formed in this country to catch runaway slaves, protect the emerging capitalist economy, and kick indigenous people off their land. Maybe the system can be reformed, maybe not. Maybe we need a whole new system. This is a conversation we need to have together in community. And indeed we are having this conversation in the diocesan racial task force. You'll learn more about that soon.

If you're a mother or a father, think about what you would do if someone took your child from you and still

was allowed to walk the streets a free man. You know what's happening. You know you wouldn't trade places with us. Compassion is when you see us suffering and you get up and do something about that.

You need to be having conversations with your black and brown neighbors, and you need to do more listening than talking. Don't bring up riots. Don't ask them, "what about black on black crime?" Just sit down, be quiet and listen. Then use your power and your white privilege to advocate for those whose voices have been drowned out by the scourge of Racism. George Floyd called for his mother in the final moments of his life. There was no compassion in what happened that day.

To my black and brown brothers and sisters, Jesus said come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. My yoke is easy and my burden is light. I know you're tired. I know the burden is heavy. But I have a feeling that one day soon we'll be able to

look back and sing “how I got over. My soul looks back and wonders how I got over.”

Let us pray.

O God

whose Son in anger

drove the money-changers

from the temple

let the anger of the families of George,

Breonna, and others slain

be to the cleansing

of this land. O God

I hold before you

the anger

the rage

the frustration

the sorrow

of all black mothers and fathers

**who demand for their children
the same chance to grow up
loving and unafraid
as any white mother or father
wants for their children; In penitence
I offer you
my own mixed-up anger
that it, with theirs,
may be taken up
into your redemptive will
in which the clash
between anger and fear
oppressed and oppressor
can give way
to the incomprehensible action
of agape-love
bringing about the reconciliation
the embrace of the other
the alien**

**the enemy
creating the festival of shalom
in which the wolf shall lie down
with the lamb
and the whole of life on earth
shall rejoice
in the splendor of your glory.**

Sources

- “Meeting Jesus for the first time” by Marcus Borg
- Quote about neutrality: Desmond Tutu
- Prayer: adapted from Margaret Nash. African prayer book, Desmond Tutu