

Claire Feingold Thoryn
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Theme: Compassion
Sermon: Changed by Compassion

First Reading: The Big Heart by Anne Sexton

“Too many things are occurring for even a big heart to hold.”
- From an essay by W. B. Yeats

Big heart,
wide as a watermelon,
but wise as birth,
there is so much abundance
in the people I have:
Max, Lois, Joe, Louise,
Joan, Marie, Dawn,
Arlene, Father Dunne,
and all in their short lives
give to me repeatedly,
in the way the sea
places its many fingers on the shore,
again and again
and they know me,
they help me unravel,
they listen with ears made of conch shells,
they speak back with the wine of the best region.
They are my staff.
They comfort me.
They hear how
the artery of my soul has been severed
and soul is spurting out upon them,
bleeding on them,
messing up their clothes,
dirtying their shoes.
And God is filling me,
though there are times of doubt
as hollow as the Grand Canyon,
still God is filling me.
He is giving me the thoughts of dogs,
the spider in its intricate web,
the sun
in all its amazement,
and a slain ram
that is the glory,

the mystery of great cost,
and my heart,
which is very big,
I promise it is very large,
a monster of sorts,
takes it all in—
all in comes the fury of love.

Second Reading: Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left [Galilee] and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.’ ²³But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.’ ²⁴He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ ²⁶He answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ ²⁷She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’ ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.

Sermon: Changed by Compassion

“My big heart
takes it all in—
all in comes the fury of love.”

“Lord, help me.”

So far this month, as we’ve explored the worship theme of Compassion together, we’ve lifted up the softer side of Love. We’ve talked about kind speech, about loving kindness, and our Pastoral Care Action team gave us a calendar with many small spiritual exercises to practice compassion.

Compassion has a sharper edge. It can be tough. It can lead us far beyond our comfort zone. It pushes our hearts to grow bigger, and those growing pains can hurt. The Latin root of compassion means “to suffer with.” Compassion asks us to widen the circle of our love and care, and then widen it again, and again. Universalism—that second half of Unitarian Universalism—asks us, “Are you sure your loving is large enough?”

This Friday I was blessed to officiate the wedding of two dear friends, Matt and Joe, in New Hampshire. This past month has been a brilliant blast of legalization of same sex marriage in many different states, with Arizona coming on board right as I headed over to the venue to marry Matt and Joe. In this realm, Love is winning.

So I was reminded of a story by my colleague James Kubal-Komoto.¹ He was getting coffee at a Starbucks in Washington State, a few years before same sex marriage became legal in that state. He was making small talk with a stranger sitting near him in the cafe. The man asked him:

“Is it true that Unitarian Universalist churches allow gay and lesbian people to get married?”

James said yes.

The man then began to quote the Bible, chapter and verse, trying convince James that same sex relationships are unholy.

So James asked him, “Is it more important to be holy or compassionate?”

The man said, “Holy.”

James replied,

“That’s an interesting answer.

In Leviticus, it does say to be holy because God is holy,
but in Luke chapter six verse 36

Jesus says, ‘Be compassionate as God is compassionate.’

It seems like Jesus preferred compassion to holiness.”

The man just sat there, flustered, his face turning a bright red and his nostrils flaring. Then suddenly, in the middle of Starbucks, the man stood up, took a step back from where James was sitting and then pointed his finger in his face and shouted in a voice that could be heard throughout the entire place, “Woe be unto you!” and stormed out the front door.

James said,

“I’d never had anybody yell ‘Woe be unto you!’ at me, especially in the middle of Starbucks, but it was actually quite exhilarating.”

Yes, my dear UUs, Luke 6:36,

“Be compassionate as God is compassionate”
is a good verse to keep in your back pocket.

Some translations say “Be merciful.”

Either way: a larger love, a love that takes action.

¹ Story from UUMA email list-serve, permission granted to use with attribution via email, May 29, 2008.

In the words of Karen Armstrong:
Compassion has got to be incarnated into practical action.

Incarnation: embodied.
Love made flesh, with our hands, our voices, our actions.

Our big heart
Can take it all in.

But Jesus himself didn't necessarily always think this way, as the Bible story this morning shows.

Jesus crossed the border from Galilee into Canaanite land,
seeking Israelites who had settled there.
Good Jews of Jesus' time did not mix with lowly Canaanites.

But then this Canaanite woman runs up to him,
asking for help for her daughter.

Not only is she a Canaanite, she's a woman—
doubly unclean and unworthy to come near this holy rabbi.

Jesus tries to ignore her, but she persists.
Jesus' disciples are disgusted by her.
They tell Jesus to send her away.

So Jesus dismisses her, saying,
"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

In other words,
"let the Canaanites deal with the Canaanites."²
She is not his problem.

But well-behaved women rarely make history.

The *persistent* Canaanite woman throws herself at Jesus's feet.

Rather than the term "persistent," male Biblical scholars tend to use the term "pushy."
(That is true.)

She begs Jesus: "Lord, Help me."

² Peter S. Hawkins, "Dogging Jesus," *Christian Century* August 2005.
<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3231>

Now, this is *Jesus*.
You'd expect him to be kind, or at least polite.
Instead, he insults her—outrageously.

He answers, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

A kneeling woman does not have far to fall.³
Here she is, low to the ground,
low in social class, low in spirit,
and the kindest holy man around
has compared her to a wild dog.

But instead of slinking away, tail between her legs, she looks him right in the eyes and says:

"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs
that fall from their masters' table."

Even a dog deserves a few scraps of kindness.

She is kneeling before him, completely at his mercy:
As our first reading said,
the artery of her soul has been severed
and soul is bleeding on him,
messing up his clothes,
dirtying his shoes.

He can't ignore her pain, her need, her *humanity*.

And so then Jesus *changes his mind*. He says:

"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

Jesus changes his mind.
Just one reason why Jesus is so cool.
He could realize when he was wrong,
He allowed himself to be changed,
he learned and grew, and as he did,
his love got larger and larger.

And he wasn't taught this lesson by a powerful person,
but by a downtrodden foreign woman,
who showed Jesus what true compassion really means.

She showed him that his work was much larger than he had ever imagined.

³ Ibid.

So when Jesus crossed back over the border into Galilee, the next thing he does, according to the book of Matthew, is to feed the four thousand.

Thanks to the lesson from the Canaanite woman, he widened his ministry to include *all* seekers.

Are we sure our loving is large enough?

Here are three stories of deep compassion.

First, feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty.

Many people from Mexico and Central America, who wish to immigrate to the United States but have no legal option to do so, risk their lives by walking through the unforgiving Arizona desert.

At night water freezes.
During the day the heat melts the soles of sneakers.

Many people—including children—die in that desert each year, just trying to walk to safety.

The Unitarian Universalist congregation of Tucson, Arizona were moved by the suffering, and founded *No Mas Muertes—No More Deaths*, a volunteer aid group that patrols the Arizona desert near the Mexican border, leaving food and water for migrants.

The volunteers are careful to not break any immigration laws by transporting or hiding people. They cooperate with Border Patrol as needed. They just don't believe that following the law means that people have to die, alone, hungry, thirsty, and suffering in the desert. The group's motto is "Humanitarian Aid is Never a Crime."

Local police don't like the group. One way they have tried to stop their work is by arresting a volunteer for breaking the one law they could actually get him for: littering.⁴ Littering, by leaving food and water for people dying of starvation and thirst.

Lord, help us.
Compassion can take us to the wilderness.
Compassion can get us arrested.

Second, finding compassion even in the face of the unforgiveable.

⁴ <http://www.nomoredeaths.org/Press-Releases/littering-conviction-of-border-volunteer-overturned-by-appeals-court.html>

A couple years ago I took part in an interfaith clergy trip to Israel. While there, we met with representatives from the “Parents Circle,” an organization of bereaved Palestinians and Israelis. The Israeli father, Ben Kfir, told us about his daughter, killed by a suicide bomber at a bus station when she was 23.

Ben was at home when it happened, and heard on the news that there had been a bombing at a bus station. And then he waited for his daughter to come home. And waited. And waited. When the police knocked on his door, he knew.

In the months to come, he was enraged. He thought very seriously about becoming suicide bomber himself and taking out Palestinians. And yet he didn’t follow through on his plan. In his heart, he knew he’d only be part of the terrible cycle of revenge. He started praying for peace, and joined the Parent’s Circle, and started meeting Palestinians who had also lost family members to the terrible conflict.

Ben tells his story of loss, again and again, with a Palestinian partner, to groups like the one I was in, in schools, and all over. He relives his pain in the hopes that compassion will move people on both sides to value peace more than revenge.

Compassion calls you to see your enemy’s humanity,
and carry their pain with yours.

Compassion calls you to share your story,
even when it hurts.

And finally, the story of compassion that I cannot get out of my mind, is medical workers in Sierra Leone, at the front lines of the Ebola epidemic.

A woman with Ebola came in to the hospital, carrying her newborn baby in a box.⁵ The woman died. The baby tested negative at that time. And the nurses could not just leave that orphaned baby alone in a box. They picked up the baby and cuddled her and cared for her.

And then the baby tested positive. And one by one, the nurses died. Eleven out of twelve of the nurses who cared for that baby.

All of the health workers working against the tide of Ebola in West Africa are at risk. They care for the sick, and they care for their own colleagues when they get sick, and die. And yet they keep going back into the wards. Their love is surely larger than I can even comprehend.

Compassion can kill us.

I keep thinking of the baby in the box. Would I have had compassion for that child?
Would I have picked her up, given her love in her last days, at the risk of my own life?

⁵ <http://www.npr.org/2014/10/10/354888965/when-holding-an-orphaned-baby-can-mean-contracting-ebola>

I keep thinking of the disciples of Jesus when they were confronted with the foreign woman's suffering. "Ignore her," they said, "She's not one of us."

What a seductive statement.

Even *Jesus* was tempted by it.

Could *my* loving *ever* be large enough? Lord help me.

Compassion is no small thing.

It requires a big, big heart.

Compassion changes us.

But first we have to allow ourselves to encounter suffering.

We even have to step forward

when we really feel like running away.

Is our loving large enough?

How are you called to be a person of compassion right now?

If you are at a loss, I know our Social Justice Action team has lots of opportunities to help people near and far.

"Too many things are occurring for even a big heart to hold" said Yeats.

We cannot hold *everything*.

But we can all do *something*.

May your heart,

which is very big,

I promise it is very large,

a monster of sorts,

take it all in—

May the fury of love find you

and change you,

and may your compassion

bring healing to this world.

Amen.