

October 26, 2014
Reverend Claire Feingold Thoryn
Sermon: The Compassionate No
Theme: Compassion

Reading: “The Journey” by Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice—
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
“Mend my life!”
each voice cried.
But you didn’t stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do—
determined to save
the only life you could save.

Sermon: The Compassionate No

You felt the old tug
at your ankles.
“Mend my life!”
each voice cried.

We’re all swimming to the other side.

This is the last Sunday in our month of Compassion. Yes, no more compassion after this. Our worship theme for next month is Truth. So I guess I’ll have to stop telling so many lies.

Let’s bring compassion home.

How do you suffer, where is *your* pain?
What is holding you back?
Did you know that you are worthy of compassion?
Did you know that you are worthy of tender care?
Did you know that you are loved?

Sometimes the most compassionate thing we can do for ourselves is to say No.

No, I won’t be treated that way any longer.
No, I can’t work overtime.
No, I can’t do that for you right now.
No excuses. Just, No.

Ten years ago I was a ministerial intern like Hillary at a congregation in New Jersey. One Sunday an older gentleman pulled me aside after church to give me a bit of advice. Interns are magnets for advice-givers. I had gotten to know this man earlier that year when I had asked him to join a committee and he had graciously declined.

He was a really tall man, and he towered above me.
“Claire,” he said, “I want to tell you the secret to a happy life.”
That sounded pretty good. Better than average advice.
“Wow! Okay! Tell me,” I said.
He leaned down and in—he really came up close.
Face to face, he said,

“I say ‘no’ to
everything
anyone
asks me to do.”

And then he smiled a beatific smile and walked away.

He didn't tell me if there were exceptions to the rule.
It did make me feel better about him declining to join the committee!

Maybe saying No to everything is a little extreme.
But it is so easy to fall into the trap
of being busy busy busy all the time.
Busy busy busy often garners praise and compliments
and when you are really busy
there isn't a lot of time to sit down and wonder
why we need to be so busy in the first place
and what we might be losing
when we fill in every crack of our lives
with work or other people's needs.

At some point compassion fatigue
or just general fatigue sets in.

Thomas Merton has said:

“The rush and pressure of modern life
is a form...of innate violence.
To allow oneself to be carried away
by a multitude of conflicting concerns,
to surrender to too many demands,
to commit oneself to too many projects,
to want to help everyone in everything
is to succumb to violence.”

So saying no to everything, for a month or a year,
might be the level of sobriety
we need to heal our addiction to being busy.

When you say No,
the whole house
might begin to tremble
and you will feel the old tug
at your ankles.
“Mend my life!” the melancholy voices will call.

Where does compassion ask us to go?
Towards the needy ones?

Or towards the stars beginning to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
towards the new voice
that is your own?

Here is a modern day parable by rabbi and psychologist Edwin Friedman. This is the story of “The Bridge.”¹

There was a man who had gone through a lot.
After many ups and downs, success and failure,
he had finally figured out what he needed to do with his life.
He started making changes to achieve this long-dreamed of goal.
Then, an opportunity came along that would not wait,
that would finally get him to the place he wanted to go.

Eager to take up this opportunity, he started off on his journey.
With every step towards it he felt stronger, happier.

As he walked, he came upon a great high bridge.
He had to cross this bridge to reach the opportunity he sought.

As he walked across this very high and long bridge,
he saw a stranger coming towards him from the opposite direction.

Squinting, he saw that it looked like this other man
had a long length of rope wrapped around his body.

As he came closer, the stranger started to unwrap the rope,
and just as they were about to pass, the stranger said,

“Pardon me, would you be so kind as to hold the end a moment?”

Surprised by this polite but curious request,
the man agreed, and took the end of the rope.

“Thank you,” said the other, who then added,
“two hands now, and remember, hold tight.”
Whereupon, the other jumped off the bridge.

Quickly the stranger’s body hurtled the distance of the rope
and the man was almost dragged over the side,
but he managed to brace himself at the last minute.
He yelled down, “What are you trying to do?”

“Just hold tight!” said the other.

The man tried to haul the stranger up,
but the weight of the man and the length of the rope
made it impossible.

¹ Edwin Friedman, *Friedman’s Fables*, “The Bridge” pages 9-13

“Why did you do this?” he called out.

“Remember,” said the other, “if you let go, I will be lost.”

“But I cannot pull you up!” the man cried.

“I am your responsibility,” said the other.

“I did not ask for it!” said the man.

“If you let go, I am lost,” repeated the other.

The man looked around for help.
There was no one else within sight.

The bridge was solid, and had **no gaps**—
there was nowhere to tie the rope, not even temporarily.

“What do you want?” he asked the man hanging below.

“Just your help,” the other answered.

“How can I help? I cannot pull you in,
and there is no place to tie the rope
so that I can go and find someone
to help me help you.”

The other said, “I know that. Just hang on;
tie the rope around your waist, it will be easier.”

The man’s arms were about to give out,
so he did as he was told.
He kept pleading with the other man,
asking *why*,
and the other man just kept repeating,
“My life is in your hands.”

What should he do?

The man thought to himself:
“If I let go, all my life I will know I let this other one die.
If I stay, I risk losing my momentum toward
my own long-sought-after salvation.
Either way this will haunt me forever.”

He even considered giving up on both,
and jumping off the bridge himself—
“That would teach this fool.”

But no, he wanted to live, and to live fully.
What a choice he had to make!

Time went by and the critical moment of decision was near.

To show his commitment to his own goals,
he had to continue his journey now.
It was already *almost too late* to arrive in time.

An idea occurred to him.
He asked the other man hanging below
to try wrapping the rope around his own waist,
to pull himself up on his own.

But the other man was not interested and refused.
“You must save me,” he called up, “If you fail, I die.”

The point of decision arrived.
What should he do?

And then, a revolutionary new idea came to him.
The man called down to the other:

“I want you to listen carefully,
because I mean what I am about to say.
I will not accept the position of choice for your life,
only for my own;
the position of choice for your life
I hereby give back to you.”

“What do you mean?” the other asked, afraid.

“I mean, simply, it’s up to you.
You decide which way this ends.
I will become the counterweight.
You do the pulling and bring yourself up.
I will even tug from here.”

He unwound the rope from his waist and braced himself against the side of the bridge.

“You cannot mean what you say,” the other shrieked.
“You would not be so selfish.
I am your responsibility.
What could be so important to you
that you would let someone die?
Do not do this to me.”

The man waited.
There was no change in the tension of the rope.

At last he said, “I accept your choice,” and freed his hands.

“Mend my life!” the voices cry.

Have you ever been handed a rope
and a responsibility you did not want?

A life that was not yours to save?

Did you say no?

Or are you still holding on?

Sometimes it is only in saying No that we can save each other.

Years ago a man told me the story of how he was saved from dying of alcoholism.

For a long time his wife had protected him from his own problem—calling in sick to work for him when he was passed out drunk in the morning, taking care of him, the house and kids.

Finally she said No.
She let go of his rope and let him fall.
She took the kids, and left him.

She strode deeper into the world,
determined to save
the only life she could save.

He woke up one morning on the kitchen floor, still drunk.
The phone was ringing: it was his boss, firing him.

He hit bottom.

And only at bottom did he discover
that he truly did want to live,
that he had the power within him to say no to alcohol.

One day at a time.
It started with his wife saying No.

We have a lot of images in this service.
The road home,
Swimming to the other side,
Crossing a bridge
Letting go of a rope.

Here's one more image.

Courtney Marshall wrote a story about learning to tend to apple trees.²

[An older gardener friend named Louise] showed [her] how each branch of the tree can only reasonably support two apples. You have to go, branch by branch, and pluck off little baby apples until every branch has only as much as it can support.

It felt sad to [her] at first, twisting off these hopeful little apples and dropping them into a bucket.

But then [she] looked over and watched as Louise pruned without fanfare, gentle and direct. She...[knew] that in order for some things to thrive, some things must die.

You say no so you can say yes.
It's sad in the way that all limitations are, but also liberating.
You are human and finite and precious and fumbling.
This is your one chance to spend your gifts,
your attention, ...your love,
on the things that matter most.
Don't screw it up by being sentimental
about what could have been
or delusional about your own capacity.
Have the grace to acknowledge your own priorities.
Prune and survive.

² <http://www.onbeing.org/blog/the-spiritual-art-of-saying-no/6718>

Prune and survive.
Swim to the other side.
Let go.
Cross your bridge.
Stride deeper and deeper into the world.

You are worthy of compassion.
You are worthy of tender care.
Be gentle with yourselves, my beloveds.

One day, though the voices
may keep shouting
“Mend my life!”
You will know what you have to do.

Even now, the stars are burning
through the clouds.

and there is a new voice calling you:
your own

and it will keep you company.

May it be so.
Amen.