

The Advent of Compassion
A Sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
Sunday, December 3, 2023
Unity Church-Unitarian

This past Thursday, my husband and I found ourselves on an empty road, near the Crex Meadows State Wildlife Refuge, at midnight – waiting. An hour passed, then two. What were we waiting for ?? We had had heard that this Thursday would be the best time to experience for ourselves that spectacular and awe-inspiring display known as the Northern Lights. We were waiting for that birth of wonder – the moment when heaven and earth reveal something of the mystery behind the ordinary dark sky. And so – we waited.

This Sunday marks the beginning of a season of waiting – known as Advent. Advent is also the beginning of the Christian liturgical calendar – a four week quiet drama that culminates on December 24th, when we light our candles against the night and welcome the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, whose birth, life, and death continues to inspire and challenge us.

I've always loved the idea of Advent and the fact that it surrounds other religious holidays, such as Hannukah, the Jewish celebration of religious freedom, and the magical night of the Winter Solstice when we fully embrace the darkness of winter and the slow return of longer days. But there's one holiday that usually isn't even included on the conventional Holidays listings in December calendars. That's December 8th, known in Asian countries as Bodhi Day, the day to

commemorate and celebrate Buddha's enlightenment, and the gift of the Four Noble Truths, which composed the foundation of the Buddhism we have today.

When Jess and I began talking about this service, she gave me a copy of the book, from which we drew this morning's reading. It's a conversation from 2016 between two spiritual leaders - the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu. Jess says that she keeps buying the book and giving it away. As I read it, I kept imagining Jesus and Buddha in conversation with one another – just like these two men – laughing, teasing, challenging, and loving one another. So this morning, I decided to look at these two spiritual leaders whose life and teachings have been such a gift to the world, through the lens of this month's worship theme – which is compassion. Both Shakyamuni (Shak-e-a-mooni) Buddha and Jesus of Nazareth have much to teach us about how to understand the spiritual practice of developing and deepening compassion. And both, I believe, have surprising challenges to us, here in the 21st century about how and when to engage our compassion.

Our secular "holiday season, from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day, does not lend itself well to the spiritual practices of Advent. Advent is a time to slow down – to wait – to watch – to be present. Just as a pregnant person must maintain that watchful patience with their body and the new life growing within, so we are encouraged to be patient spiritually with all that is growing inside of us. Yet, it always seems that in December, instead of quieting down, everything ramps up – the parties, the concerts, and the calls for giving more. This is the season when

compassion is equated with giving generously, of one's time and money. Starting with Giving Tuesday this past week, I counted fifteen emails a day from organizations to which I already give and others related to them? Do I respond to those annual entreaties, or go to the immediately pressing ones related to the devastations of ongoing wars? Do I instead give more money to the people in Saint Paul, who stand by the freeways entrance holding a sign that reads "Hungry, please help?" Do I volunteer time instead of money at this season and volunteer for a community partner? What do we do with our compassionate impulses? How do we know where to put our precious time and energy?

Buddha and Jesus both had some wisdom that helps answer these questions. But before we can get to answers, let's step back to a beginning that happened one morning, when a star in the east rose in the sky and the world changed. No, it's not the star that guided the three Magi in the Christmas story – although I've always been interested that this same star figures in both the Buddhist and Christian origin stories. This is the morning star that rose not a thousand years ago, but some 2,500 years ago, and that Shakyamuni saw after many days of sitting in deep meditation underneath a Banyan tree. He had determined that he would not get up from that spot until he had understood the realities of old age, sickness, and death after leaving his privileged and protected palace grounds.

He sat and he waited and waited and waited. As the legend goes, on the 49th day of his meditation, that morning star rose, like every other day, but and upon

seeing it that day, the Buddha exclaimed, “I, together with all beings, am awake !”

And what was the result of this enlightenment? the Four Noble Truths; first - the truth of suffering as a basic condition of existence, second - that the cause of suffering is attachment; third - that there is a way out of suffering; and that the way out is described by an Eight-Fold Path of wisdom, ethics, and action. With this deep acknowledgement of suffering came its’ companion insight; that when we fully understand that your suffering is my suffering, compassion arises. The root meaning of the word “compassion” is commonly understood as “to suffer with”. Or, as a Jewish wisdom teaching puts it: : “there shall be such closeness between us, that when one cries, the other tastes salt.”

Most people these days think about the baby Jesus at Christmas time and then after the star in the east has set and the three kings have gone home, we forget about him again until Easter, maybe. In this church, we recognize that what’s really important about Jesus was not that he was born – but what he grew up to become, and what he did. When we look at the stories of Jesus’ life, we find so many of them that are teaching stories about compassion. In a world that expected life to be harsh and brutal; in a country under occupation, in a culture that elevated men over women, Jesus’ life consistently challenged those expectations.

Into this world Jesus began to preach about the Kingdom of God, what we call here Beloved Community, and the stories about how he did this tell us that

Jesus taught about compassion, not just with sympathetic words, but by dramatic actions.

When Jesus sat with and taught a Samaritan woman at a well, at noon, just the two of them – right there was a violation of social taboos. When he walked through the streets of Jerusalem, a woman touched the hem of his garment, believing that her flow of blood would be staunched if she could but touch him. Instead of rejecting her, he said “your faith has made you well, go in peace.” It is not only his birth we celebrate - but the ways in which his legacy of compassion for all whom he encountered continues to challenge us today.

I have been struck by the fact that similar stories of compassion in action are told about the Buddha. Buddha and other monks were visiting a village and a woman named Kachangkala was at the well drawing water when she glimpsed the Buddha from a distance. She found something about him so remarkably familiar that she mistook him for her own son. She put her pot on the ground and ran toward him with her arms flung wide open, crying out “my son! My son!” The Buddha’s monks were alarmed and instinctively closed ranks around the Buddha, blocking her attempts to embrace him, because everyone knew that the monastic code expressly forbade monks to have contact with women.

But Buddha responded with compassion and (literally translated) said to them: “Do not hinder her. If you don’t let this woman take the Tathagata in her arms, she will spew warm blood from her mouth and die,” which is a vivid

physical expression of the broken-heartedness she would feel. The monks relented and Kachangkala and the Buddha embraced her. This encounter led Kachangkala to become a nun, which women weren't supposed to do, and eventually become an *arhat*, a being of tremendous realization. Buddha's compassion not only led to her enlightenment but was a teachable moment for his disciples.

One compassionate act can be contagious! “Recent research by social scientists Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler suggests that the ripple effect of compassion can extend out to two and three degrees of separation. In other words, experiments with large numbers of people show that if you are kind and compassionate, your friends, your friend's friend's and even your friend's, friend's friend's are more likely to become kind and compassionate.”

To be compassionate is to practice a form of enlightenment, but it does indeed take practice!

We should note, however, that philosophically, Buddhism and Western Christianity describe the practice of compassion from different perspectives. In an article in *The Greater Good* magazine, author Jennifer Goetz has described this difference succinctly: Buddhist compassion is cold and Western Compassion is warm! and both expressions of compassion are legitimate!

Let me unpack this a bit. Goetz writes this: “Although often expressed as loving kindness...Buddhism makes a strict distinction of compassion from what it calls grasping love and attachment... Buddhist compassion is not particularly warm, or even a feeling. While Buddhism does not deny the natural feelings that may arise from seeing another in need, this is not the compassion Buddhism values. Instead, Buddhist compassion is the result of knowing one is part of a greater whole and is interdependent and connected to that whole. Indeed, Buddhist compassion should be without heat or passion – it is objective cold, constant and universal...”

What? Cold compassion? Is this a kind of antidote to what we here in the west call “Compassion fatigue?” In a sense, that may be true. Our Minister of Faith Formation, KP Hong has pointed out to me that if compassion is a daily spiritual practice of attention and clarity to how all of us are connected, then you can never get tired of being compassionate. It is not just a sympathetic feeling. It is a way of being. The coldness that I have described is not about a detached compassion.

All the human emotions associated with compassion are still there in Buddhist practice. However, awakening to both the limitlessness of our compassion and the limits of our human ability to end suffering requires knowledge and wisdom. Sometimes this cold compassion can involve giving someone what they really need, not what they want. When one of my granddaughters has a meltdown because I stop her from running out into the street,

I can feel compassion for her frustration – yet I know something that she doesn't. I am instilling in her the habits of keeping her body safe. My compassion doesn't extend to letting her get everything she wants.

Unlike Buddhist compassion, the warm Western expressions of which Jennifer Goetz speaks is more personal, usually directed at an individual. It arises from the feeling of concern for another individual's suffering. It's equated with kindness, sympathy and empathy. This kind of warm compassion can be impulsive, spontaneous, and subjective. There is nothing wrong with this warm approach to compassion, but sometimes I wonder, was it enough? Was I living out of compassion – or out of guilt or impulse – or pure emotion?

There's no one right answer. As I often do when writing sermons, I start to cull my memory banks for stories from my own life that relate to the topic and theme.

And this one came to me as an example of both kinds of compassion – hot and cold; western and eastern. Or, at least it speaks to me that way. See what you think.

When I was a college student I found at a thrift store a mannequin head. For some reason, I loved that mannequin head. I hauled her from my dorm room to my first apartment. I gave it name, Gracie! I put funny hats and wigs on her. My friends thought was hilarious. During my second year of college I was having a terrible time. My boyfriend had broken up with me! I was flunking out of

Symbolic Logic! I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. I stood in the driveway of my parents house, preparing to go back to my dorm room after a weekend break, and for some reason, Gracie was in my hands. When I reached to hug my mother, Gracie fell onto the driveway and broke apart in pieces.

Something in me – seeing this silly mannequin head shattered on the ground felt like it was my life. I sobbed in my mother’s arms, and drove back to my apartment. Mom said she would clean up the mess, as she often did.

When Christmas came around there was a box under the tree, and lo and behold. It was Gracie. My mother had taken all the parts of that broken head and reassembled them and, because she was an artist, had touched them up in such a way that I could barely tell where it had broken. Gracie was restored – and I knew at that moment something in me had been restored as well.

Her simple act of compassion – of love – involved repairing this one piece of the world. I knew I could get sympathy and even empathy from my mother whenever I needed it, but there was something about her taking the time to do this one concrete act of repair that made a lot of difference to me.

Compassion is not just a feeling, If it’s truly a practice of the spirit, informed by a deep understanding of our interconnected interdependence on one another, then, it’s an action as well. As we heard in the reading today: ” if we see a person who is being crushed by a rock, the goal is not to get under the rock and feel what they are feeling; it is to help to remove the rock.”

Most of us go through our lives without such extreme experiences. Rather than being crushed by a rock, our day to day challenges are more like little pebbles of greed, anger, and ignorance that come out of nowhere and wear down our compassion.

I began this sermon today out on a empty road, surrounded by dark fields, waiting, waiting, for a kind of enlightenment – provided by that natural show called the Northern Lights to begin. We waited and waited and dozed and waited some more and the Northern Lights never appeared – at least where we were. What did appear was all kinds of feelings – boredom, annoyance, disappointment, exhaustion.

But as I let all those arise and tried to let them go, I remembered at last that out there in the darkness there was plenty to see that wasn't as dramatic as the Northern Lights, There was that same celestial star in the east that the wise men and Buddha had each seen and been inspired by. Many many other stars that I never see in the Cities were also there to marvel at. And then – as I looked down across the fields, I saw the stars were not just in the sky. They were in the grasses too! The moonlight was illuminating the dew on the fields and it literally looked like thousands of stars shimmering in the moonlight all around us. What we waited for didn't appear – but something else did, and that night we could understand that insight, that feeling, represented by the words of Buddha -- together with all beings, we are awake.

As you begin your journey this month towards whatever holidays you celebrate, may you find the patience to let compassion for all beings appear. May you find the ways that you can relieve suffering – your own, others' and world's, with a passionate and dispassionate compassion. May you find inspiration in the stars, above, and below.