

Asking With the Sheep, "When Did We...?"

The Love that is God gathers us together for a time of reflection on this last of twenty-six Sundays in the long, green growing season of ordinary time in the circle of the church year. We find ourselves welcome on this land which has lived in relationship with many people groups across millennia. This morning, we wonder with the sheep and the goats in Jesus' story: how might we learn to sharpen our senses such that we see and feel with more clarity our own behavior and its impacts?

Let's begin with prayer: God of all, may the posture of our spirits be open as we welcome your Holy Loving Spirit to move within and among us today. Move us toward fuller compassion. In your name, we pray. Amen.

Beloved neighbors, how much do you see when you look at yourself in a mirror? Do you notice the colors, textures, and shapes of the outermost layer of your body? Do you also notice the expression in your eyes and the set of your mouth and brow? Can you see yourself even more fully, noting the feelings beneath the expression your face displays? **How much of yourself do you receive with your senses and empathic heart? How much do you see, hear, or empathetically feel of the other with whom you cross paths?**

I invite you to close your eyes if you are comfortable doing so. Take a moment to bring to your mind's eye someone for whose wellbeing you care deeply. Bring that loved one (that friend, that associate, one person) to your mind's eye. And now try being a mirror (a place of reflection). Do you notice the colors, textures, and shapes of that person's outermost layer of their body? Do you see the look in their eyes, the set of their mouth and of their brow? And can you see them even more fully, wondering about the feelings beneath the expression their face displays?

I invite you to open your eyes again if you wish. As we see deeper layers of ourselves and the other, we strengthen our capacity for compassion. Denotatively, compassion means to “suffer with” oneself or another through tangible expression of care.

Self-compassion and compassion toward others require openness to discomfort, even suffering. Depth of compassion requires tremendous courage, vulnerability and honesty.

I have discovered two behaviors that are among those that I think are key if we are to sharpen our capacity for practicing compassion.

- We need to hold our senses open (as we just have) so that our mind and heart can process the sights, sounds and feelings we receive. Then we will have input to which our loving intentions can respond.
- And we need to be open to receiving honest feedback when our expressions of care are not actually felt as caring and supportive by the other. Clear intention is important. But the impact of felt compassion is more powerful than the import of our intentions. The impact of felt compassion is more powerful than the import of our intentions.

What if we don't receive a verbal communication from the other to tell us how our behavior is landing with them? We can be more diligent in watching expressions in eyes, voices, and bodies to sense how we are impacting the other. Compassion is a building block for trust, and experiences of trust expand our openness and confidence in acting with compassion.

So thinking of compassion as noticing the other and responding accordingly, I invite each of us to wonder today and in coming days:

- **When have I recently acted with compassion toward myself – that one in the mirror?**
- **When have I recently acted with compassion toward another?**

Our gospel reading for today urges us to hold up mirrors for ourselves and for each other. Let us first dive into both the challenges and the words of encouragement that Matthew offer.

Our reading from Matthew is often interpreted as an apocalyptic text – one that paints a picture of what the ending of the world could look like. In the gospel text, Jesus describes the “Promised One” (a being embodying the radiant presence of God’s all-powerful, all-knowing, ever-present Love) encountering the people and separating them based on their behavioral habits.

We heard: *“The ruler will say to those on the right, ‘Come, you blessed of my Abba, God! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world! For I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me; naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you comforted me; in prison and you came to visit me.’”* (Matthew 25:34-36)

“Then the ruler will say to those on the left, ‘Out of my sight, you accursed ones! Into that everlasting fire prepared for the Devil and the fallen angels! I was hungry and you gave me no food; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you gave me no welcome; naked and you gave me no clothing. I was ill and in prison and you did not come to visit me.’” (Mt. 25:41-43)

The “*kingdom prepared for [us] from the creation of the world*” is, of course, right here and now; we co-create it every day.

And the “*everlasting fire*” of suffering is also right here and right now, because we unfortunately co-create that every day, too. So we have reason to increase our compassionate awareness.

Those considered sheep (that is, followers of the way of the God’s Love) reflect back on their lives and wonder aloud, *When did we...?* That question ends with the various acts of compassion named by the Promised One. Today, we can ask ourselves the question as well: when did I act with compassion? That is: when did I “suffer with?”

What impact can we have when we lean into faith in a loving God to supply us with courage and energy to live in compassionate ways?

Hear again these words of encouragement from our ancestor in faith, the apostle Paul: *“I pray that the God of our Savior Jesus Christ – the God of glory – will give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation, to bring you to a rich knowledge of the Creator. I pray that God will enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you can see the hope this call holds for you”* (Ephesians 1:17-18). Indeed, may God’s compassionate love “*enlighten the eyes of [our] minds.*”

I have long appreciated words from author, lecturer, peace activist, and also 2020 US presidential candidate Marianne Williamson about the power we each have as a unique human being. Williamson wrote, *“You are a child of God. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people don’t feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us. It is in everyone. As you let your light shine, you unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As you are liberated from your own fears, your presence automatically liberates others.”*

As we each shine, friends, with compassionate light, we encourage others to do so as well.

We live each day of our lives in moments. In the days in which we are living within our homes, neighborhoods, our nation, this world; we witness so much within ourselves and in those we encounter.

We witness pain, worry, confusion, heartbreak, grief, exhaustion. Moment by moment, encounter by encounter. And we witness (if we're paying attention) beauty, kindness, clarity, endurance, new beginnings, and glimmers of hope. Moment by moment, encounter by encounter.

And Paul also wrote to his friends in Ephesus and to us: *"And the church is Christ's body; it's the fullness of the One who fills all of creation"* (Eph. 1:23). Friends, how will we feel even all of this church community or affect the fullness of the St. Croix Valley – with the sense of Christ's body, with this compassionate love? For this very reason, we are engaging in the spiritual practice of completing our Shared Ministry Inventory this Sunday and next Sunday. So that we can bring ourselves to a greater fullness by the ways that we pitch in our energy from time to time when an opportunity arises or commit ourselves to a particular endeavor. There are so many ways that we can be the fullness of this compassionate presence in our community.

May we learn to regularly practice self-compassion and compassion for others, so that when we find ourselves asking with the sheep, *"when did we...?"* and able to reflect back with gratitude on our experiences of shared compassion. May we be courageous enough to be mirrors for one another – such that we see our whole God-imagined selves more clearly. May these faithful moves lead us to discover new and deepening ways of compassion. Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 25:31-46