

The Boundless Compassion of God
Sunday, July 10, 2022, 10:00 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Dr. Sally Howard

Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope.

Maya Angelou

Good morning All Saints. Whenever I hear the parable of the Good Samaritan, I can't help but think about and smile at our Easter Vigil version, when our liturgist, Melissa Hays, plays the robber, and verger, Anina Minotto plays the fallen traveler. Our own rector Mike Kinman, as a high priest, seeing the photo op, lies down on the ground to take a selfie with the victim, before walking on. The person who plays the good Samaritan is a surprise each year—chosen to reflect that God's grace often comes from people we don't expect. At the Easter Vigil, we affirm that God's compassion has no borders; that every person belongs. Our deepest human needs are for compassion and belonging, and She who is Love at the center of all that exists, is there to meet them. Nothing and no one are beyond the reach and power of God's love, and not even death can separate us from it. This awareness is the cornerstone of joyful spirituality.

According to the church calendar year, we are now in what is called "ordinary time". The paschal fire of Easter and the flaming tongues of Pentecost may have faded from our awareness. God knows there are so many things that distract us from our truest selves. Just everyday life can take me off center, and I know that I am not alone. I have to strive daily to maintain a meditative discipline and prayerfulness, that I may dwell in the presence of God.

In addition to the challenges to of our personal life, we live in a country influenced by a society of malignant regression that seeks to control the bodies of those who can become pregnant, and that devalues and shed off bodies of color. We disrespect even the body of the earth herself. We have become our most dangerous enemy, turning our own Constitution into a weapon.

The gun violence in America is a horror, with multiple hate killings that target people by race, religion or really, any perceived otherness. We know that these atrocities are often perpetuated by young men who are angry, socially alienated and feel invisible. The string of mass shootings continues as our nation fails to limit the access to weapons of war. Fourth of July shootings not only occurred in Chicago, but in Los Angeles, Sacramento, Galt, CA, New York, Kansas City, Richmond, Kenosha, Indianapolis, Minneapolis, and Philadelphia. From the Los Angeles Times editorial board: mass shootings have become as American as apple pie.

All Saints, we are a community dedicated to grace in action, and we reflect that and take action in the world for peace and justice. But quite frankly, sometimes it feels like it's not enough—and perhaps it's not. We need to remind ourselves that there are spiritual powers and energies present in the material world and within ourselves, that can vibrate with God's love, or live in estrangement from it. There is a powerful connection between dwelling in the presence of God through meditation and prayer, and being transformers of hate and alienation in the world. Connected to the Source, we become the conduits of God's healing energy in everyday life. Without grounding ourselves in spiritual realities, we can feel powerless, like tiny boats trying to navigate rocky shores through fog thick with turbulence and waves too fast and furious. We need truth, we need healing, and empowerment and hope. Where can we turn when our country and our world are reeling from the toxicity of increased intolerance, alienation, and violence?

We can start with this very familiar parable from our lectionary by de-colonize it's origins—lest we think that loving God and our neighbor as ourselves is only a Christian idea, it is not. This double love, or triple love is present in all major religious traditions. When Jesus answers the lawyer, he is directly drawing from Jewish scriptures. Distilling the commandments to the importance of double love of God and neighbor marks Jesus as a Jewish teacher—not a christian one! Jesus was a Jew, an outsider, an immigrant, poor and unemployed. He preached communal distribution of goods. He was not a white American Christian capitalist! When God pitched her tent with us in Christ, She dwelled in proximity to all those on the margins of power.

Although the lawyer in the interchange has been portrayed as hostile toward Jesus, it is just as likely that his testing involves divergent understandings of the Law. Hebrew Scriptures included sojourners as neighbors, but the term was primarily understood as members of the practicing Jewish community. We can perhaps identify with the Lawyer, who is kind of looking for the class syllabus in order to pass the final exam,—a list that tells him what he must read, and also very importantly what he is not responsible for and won't be tested on. The lawyer is seeking limits to his obligations.

Jesus does the opposite. Instead of defining the limits of responsibility, he points towards a way to live and be in the world with unlimited compassion. In the words of Moses, "The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." It's not out there, it's in here.

The boundless compassion of God is near—within us and all around us. It is written in our hearts and draws us close to the suffering of others. It does not guarantee safety nor contain cost. The scenario of a man falling victim to robbers was realistic. Banditry was wide spread as a result of the exploitation of peasants and landless laborers. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was traveled by many of Jerusalem's elite, and proved quite fruitful for brigands posing as wounded victims. To come close to a victim, according to Jewish law, was not only taking a risk of being defiled for touching one already dead, but also risking being harmed or killed by a poser.

In his story, Jesus makes an additional twist by casting a Samaritan as the good neighbor. Jesus chose a person considered an outsider, an enemy, to reveal what it means to be a neighbor. Jews and Samaritans had a mutual hatred 8 centuries old. Although both groups observed the same law and worshiped the same God, Jews regarded Samaritans as only half Jewish. No Jewish person would have identified with the hated Samaritans. But Jesus sees beyond hate and all the labels we human beings put on each other, to what is deepest in each person's heart. He calls us out, like Lazarus from the tomb, to live into the energy at the heart of God.

Note that because Jews and Samaritans followed the same law, the Samaritan risks defilement by touching a corpse of someone not in his immediate family. This is a person who could well have despised him, but moved by compassion, the Samaritan dares to get dirty. He uses his wares of oil and wine healing the victim and binding his wounds, and then entrusts an inn-keeper with a blank check for the victim's care, risking being held responsible for an exorbitant amount. Jesus answers the lawyer's question, not by defining the limits of responsibility, but by shattering the limits with unbounded compassion. It's not obeying the rules, but knowing the truth of who we are. We need to discover the light in ourselves and everyone else.

Father Greg Boyle once said, just assume the answer to every question is compassion. Our neighbor is not just the person living next door. Our neighbor is not one who happens to be convenient for us to help. Our neighbor is not the one who meets our qualifications. In fact, our neighbor can be the one who by their difference from us, de-thrones our preferred point of view. Compassion was at the heart of Jesus' soul. It is who he was. He went where love had not yet arrived.

Jesus defied all the categories upon which the world insisted; good-evil; success-failure: pure-impure. He was an equal opportunity pisser-offer. The traditionalists questioned where he chose to stand and were offended by the proximity he kept to those they rejected. Those who liked revolution in high gear were impatient with his brand of solidarity.

For truth and healing in our nation, my friends, the hidden aspects of our founding story of violence and trauma must be told. We need to tell it as a nation, a city, and a church. Our Fourth of July celebrates White European settlers who came to this land to escape trauma and violence, severing ties to country and kin, which then became described as pure freedom. We leave out the spirit of dominance they embodied and a mentality that insisted on responding to perceived enemies with fear and violence, including genocide and enslavement. They needed guns to keep those without them, enslaved or eradicated. That mentality defined whiteness as godliness, and neighbors as those “civilized” in European ways. They embraced a story of a punitive God, which left their own trauma without a home, and led to their repeating and perpetrating the trauma on others. Our country will not heal until we hear and tell our whole stories. We must see that our white supremacist patriarchal culture and the story of an all male White Christian God to match it, hurts people.

It can destroy those who don’t fit that dominant mold. It also hurts those who identify with it in some ways, but feel they can’t and don’t fit into it and don’t belong—like many of the young men who enact mass shootings. Research is scant and each individual who perpetuates mass violence is unique, but in their writings, many reveal cultural estrangement as expressed in terms of “us vs. them” language and rejection of institutions. This rejection results from an awareness that society acts to protect the elite, and that laws and institutions are meant to disenfranchise and disempower the masses. Certain social norms seem to have a most profound alienating effect on these young men, who describe a pervasive culture of consumerism and masculinity, in particular how masculinity is tied to sports, sexuality, and self-esteem. These young men are encumbered by feelings of social alienation that are deeply rooted in the power dynamics and social norms experienced in school life.

God calls us not only to follow the way of Jesus, which is always the way of compassion, but also to trust that it has power far beyond what we can think or imagine. We need to allow the healing power of God’s compassion to wash over us, to surround and fill us, then we can go into the world, replacing fear with love; vindictiveness with openhearted kindness; envy with supportive affection; withering judgement with extravagant tenderness. The ordinary time we live in—tribal, divisive, anchored in the illusion of separation—is unhealthy, sad, and fearful. We must propel ourselves and each other, into the world to cultivate a movement whose ventilating force is tender compassion where all are valued and belong.

During this last month, I keep remembering a story from the inauguration weekend as Trump’s presidential era began. I felt some of the same anger, sadness, and mounting discouragement

that I can feel now. After the inaugural speech was over, I slipped into church to meet with one of our healers, who placed her hands on my heart and back and prayed for me. As she prayed, I began to feel warmth, and a weight lifted from my heart, mind, and body. I left feeling a sense of peace beyond the events of the day, grounded in God's love.

The next morning, my daughter, husband, and I went to the Women's march in downtown Los Angeles. Moving through a crowd of half a million people, we ended up at a stage where we were told, to our surprise, that U2 would be playing. I was excited. As we waited, I became aware of shouting and pushing behind me. I turned to see three young people standing behind me with masks or bandanas covering their faces.

One, a young woman, was in an escalating physical altercation with several other marchers. When I turned, she was almost literally in my arms, and I instinctively moved my body between her and a much larger person she was shouting at, who in return, told her to leave and go home. She was crying and shaking, and screamed, "I have a right to be here too! I'm not a terrorist!" I was so moved by her, this person I didn't know, and I recognized the Spirit of God present with us. I asked her what her name was. "Hannah," she said, "I am an anarchist! Not a terrorist! None of this makes any difference, you know. Nothing has any meaning!" I assured her that there was room for her at the march, and that she could stand by me.

"F--- this parade! F--- these people! None of this matters!" she said, as she stood shaking next to me. Almost as if on cue, the ballad called "Pride" began, an anthem and tribute to Martin Luther King and Jesus. Someone behind us began to protest Hannah's presence, and I asked her if I could put my arm around her shoulder. I turned to the protestor, and said, "It's OK, she is with me." As the group began to sing, we stood, my arm around her shoulder, and her hand in the air flipping off the whole event.

I can tell you that at that moment I felt all of you there with me, the hands of compassion and healing that had been laid on me extended to this young woman. The song continued, I joined the crowd in singing the chorus, "in the name of love", and her arm began to lower. It got lower and lower, and the finger came down, and she relaxed into my arm. Before she left, I told her about a place in Pasadena where I knew she would always be welcome.

God's Spirit of love and compassion is the greatest power in the universe, and it is literally in our hearts and at our finger tips every moment of every day. We just need to experience it and pass it on, without measure or qualification, trusting in the abundance of God to amplify our alignment with Her compassion. Ours is a non-linear universe in which we never know which

small act of compassion or large, concerted effort will tilt our world towards a place where everyone belongs and matters, but God in her mercy is with us every step of the way.

Amen