

June 6, 2010
United Church of Northfield
I Kings 17:8–24, Luke 7: 11-17
Charter of Compassion handout at end of sermon

The Bread of Compassion
Rev. Roger L. Brown

Introduction

We move this Sunday into the season called Ordinary Time. We have moved out of the nearby special Sundays of Pentecost and Trinity. That we move liturgically through Ordinary Time is, I think, significant. For we live most of our lives in ordinary time. While every day is special and blessed by God, every day has its ordinary tasks and routine that we must navigate through on our journey through life. Most of life is ordinary, not holiday time.

Scripture Connection

In spite of this not being a special liturgical holiday, we have presented to us by the common lectionary, two very similar stories which are quite extra-ordinary! Elijah befriends a Canaanite woman, providing her with a miracle pantry of unlimited food. In our Gospel reading, Jesus heals the son of a poor widow. Truly, these are extra-ordinary events! Each of these texts is a story of holy compassion in action.

The Story Details

Our theme this morning, as you can guess from the liturgy, is compassion. The stories for today illustrate God's compassion and the compassion of God's people in action. Elijah has been sent by God to go to Zarephath. There he asks a poor Canaanite woman for some bread. She rightly complains that all she has left is enough to feed herself and her son. After that her cupboard will be completely empty. We might ask where is the compassion here? In effect, Elijah is saying to the woman, "have compassion on me! I'm in desperate need!" But the Canaanite woman has the same complaint – "have compassion on me, for I'm almost out of food. I don't have any left over for you." Somehow, the widow gives in, and feeds Elijah. Then, I believe, God has compassion on the entire situation. Then God through Elijah makes possible a miracle of plenty. Day after day, there is an inexhaustible supply of food. God, and Elijah have finally realized the desperate straights that the widow is in, so he gives in and helps her.

What is Compassion

I'm not sure of the dictionary definition, of Compassion, but I think it means to help a very needy person when they are in a rather desperate situation. The widow's situation becomes even more needy and overwhelming when her son dies. Consider her plight. Without her son to help her out, and maybe to live with, she will have very few resources to help with her life in fast approaching old age.

The story in the Gospel of Luke is very similar. The only son of a widow has died. Jesus encounters a widow whose son has died. She is also in desperate straights because without her son to help her later in life she faces serious problems. Jesus sees just how desperate she is and so he responds. Then Jesus takes action and takes it immediately.

The Nature of Compassion

Compassion is a complex subject, and we will only touch the surface. Compassion is our emotional and action response to a situation. It is our response to a situation where there is great need, and often great need do to something about it immediately. The Canaanite woman needed more food right now, not next week. If Jesus was going to raise the child, he could not wait days or weeks, or think about it and come back

later. Immediate action was required. Compassion requires action – there isn't time to wonder about all the problems of the world, and consider all the reasons some countries have more food available than others. There isn't time to consider the problems and economic matters of the medical establishment and wonder why the health care system is in crisis. Action and concern are required.

Acting compassionately means to have sympathy for the situation of another person, and not to judge the circumstances of the situation.

Outreach Ministry at the United Church

In order to give you an example of this kind of compassionate thinking, let me share with you a recent example in my ministry. I had a request to help a Northfield neighbor – not living next door, but in town - with his electric bill. The electric service was about to be turned off, so I couldn't spend days sorting out the situation. I couldn't be bothered with spending energy worrying about the poor economy which means more people are out of work and need help with utilities. I needed to be compassionate and write a check from our helping fund. (Yes, I did visit the Town Hall and check on the status of this person's electric bill.)

Karen Armstrong's Charter for Compassion

The wonderful thing about Karen Armstrong's Charter for Compassion is that it builds peace and healthy relationships across wide religious points of view. Our scripture stories point to compassion on a one to one individual basis, but the Charter commends us to open our arms very wide and have world-wide compassion. The fundamental theological idea that is so important is that Karen Armstrong bases her Charter on the most common ethical command in the three Abrahamic religions - "love your neighbor as yourself." – the Golden Rule. If you truly love your neighbor, you will be compassionate, you will resist judging them, and as a neighbor you will be more inclined to open your arms and embrace their needs.

Conclusion

I have included a copy of the Charter for Compassion with the bulletin this morning, so you can read it. I have also included a detailed history of its development as well as a page of resources and some status report on its reception on the world-wide stage. I hope you will go online and sign the Charter and that you will share it with friends.

I don't think it would be too great a leap for our town to become "Compassionate Northfield" and join with "Compassionate Seattle." I know this church is involved in reaching out compassionately through programs like CERV – the local foodbank, and the Summer Lunch program. I'm quite new in town, so there may be many other examples of compassionate care of which I'm unaware.

Indeed, we are blessed to serve a compassionate God who commends us to compassionate caring as well. Amen.

The Front and Back Handout with the Bulletin on Charter for Compassion

Charter for Compassion

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to

anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women ~ to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

A Brief History of the Development of the Charter

Karen Armstrong, one of the most original thinkers on the role of religion in the modern world and author of more than 20 books around the ideas of what Judaism, Christianity and Islam have in common and their effect on world events, originated the idea of a Charter for Compassion in early 2008. Later that year, it began to build its partnership network with organizations around the world. In November the Charter for Compassion launched a website and invited people from all faiths, all nations, and all backgrounds to submit their own words to the Charter. Well over 150,000 people from over 180 nations had participated by mid-December.

In February, 2009, the Council of Conscience, a gathering of high-level religious leaders and thinkers, met in Switzerland to take the words of the world and craft the Charter of Compassion. In September, Karen Armstrong participated in a session on compassion in action at the Vancouver peace Summit with the Dalai Lama and many Nobel Laureates.

On November 12, 2009, the Charter for Compassion was presented to the world with Karen Armstrong's wish: "I wish that you would help with the creation, launch, and propagation of a Charter for Compassion, crafted by a group of leading inspirational thinkers from the three Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and based on the fundamental principles of universal justice and respect."

The Charter has now been translated into more than 30 languages and more than 47,700 have affirmed the Charter. More information is available on the website: www.charterforcompassion.net. Also, a *Compassion Action Network* has been created for "Awakening compassion in our children, ourselves and our world." Has been created. Its website is www.compassionactionnetwork.com.

Charter for Compassion Updates and Resources

Greetings friends!

We have had a monumental last month – the message of the Charter continues to fan out all around the world. In particular, we're thrilled to see entire cities adopting the Charter. If you want to share how you are spreading the message of the Charter or have thoughts on ways we can support your commitment to the Charter, please write to us at contact@charterforcompassion.org.

- **Compassionate Seattle** – On April 24, The City of Seattle became America's first official "Compassionate City," by affirming the Charter for Compassion. The Compassionate Action Network supported this effort and has launched a 10-year compassionate cities initiative. In honor of the achievement, Seattle held [festival of compassion](#), which Karen Armstrong keyed.

- **Wisdom 2.0** - Members of the Charter team attended the first ever Wisdom 2.0 conference earlier this month. The conference explored living with awareness, wisdom, and compassion in our technology-filled lives. It was a fascinating mix of luminaries from the worlds of both technology and wisdom traditions. Check out highlights and videos from the conference [here](#).
- **Charter Launch in Cape Town, South Africa** – On Thursday, May 20th, South Africans of many faiths packed into the headquarters of the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative to watch Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu unveil the city’s first Charter of Compassion plaque. The Interfaith Initiative celebrated their 10-year anniversary with an affirmation of the Charter and encouraging others to sign. Charter Council of Conscience member Rev. Peter Storey spoke of the process of writing the Charter and Karen Armstrong shared a touching video message with the crowd. Rev. Storey’s poignant account of the event and his concern for South African today can be found here.
- **Dalai Lama in The New York Times** – In the midst of his United States visit, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama had a [moving opinion piece](#) in this week’s New York Times about compassion and interfaith relations. The piece is a perfect articulation of the message of the Charter.
- **Karen Armstrong’s New Vook** – Karen is coming out with a new book – with a twist. Set to launch on iTunes in early June. “12 Steps to a Compassionate Life,” is being published by vook, which uses an innovative new approach to reading that combines written narrative, video and an interactive web platform. “12 Steps to a Compassionate Life” looks at the need for compassion in today’s world and what Karen deems to be the integral components to living a more compassionate life.

In recent months, we’ve been thrilled to see an increase in activity within our vibrant online community of charter affirmers. Join us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter \(@thecharter\)](#) and contribute to the ongoing dialogue online.

You can continue to support the Charter by reminding your network to affirm the Charter, embedding the Charter [widget](#) in your blog or on your website, and using [sign-up forms](#) at your face-to-face events.

Fondly,

The Charter Team