“Compassion: Moving the Wall”*

*Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

(Part V of VIII in the sermon series, “The Essence of Christianity”)

The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

March 15, 2015

From the Pulpit
The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215
Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741
Email: home@first-church.org
Website: http://www.first-church.org
A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 15, 2015, Lent IV, dedicated to the custodial and nursery staffs of First Church and all the work they do day in and day out, week in and week out for our congregation and the care of our building and our children as they do this with compassion and love and always to the glory of God!

“Compassion: Moving the Wall”*

Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

(Part V of VIII in the sermon series, “The Essence of Christianity”)

The Essence of Christianity – we opened with Courage, Beloving, Following, Justice, Compassion….Still ahead Hope, Love and Resurrection Faith. Today, we focus on Compassion -which is first and foremost the comingling of heart and mind to change the way we receive and interact with our friends, with strangers and with enemies. Compassion defined Jesus as much as he defined compassion.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.
It is said that during the Second World War some soldiers serving in France wanted to bury a friend and fellow soldier who had been killed in action. Being in a foreign country they wanted to ensure their fallen comrade had a proper burial. They found a well-kept cemetery with a low stone wall around it, a picturesque little Catholic church and a peaceful outlook. This was just the place to bury their friend. But when they approached the priest he answered that unless their friend was a baptized Catholic he could not be buried in the cemetery. He wasn’t.

Sensing the soldiers’ disappointment the priest showed them a spot outside the walls where they could bury their friend. Reluctantly they did so.

The next morning the soldiers returned to pay their final respects to their fallen friend but could not find the grave. “Surely we can’t be mistaken. It was right here!” they said. Confused, they approached the priest who was gardening nearby. He took them to a spot inside the cemetery walls. “Last night I couldn’t sleep” said the priest. “I was troubled that your friend had to be buried outside the cemetery walls, so I got up and moved the wall.”

Compassion means moving the wall.

How often have you moved your walls in changing in your heart and mind? If you ever have and when you did - Compassion was at the core of this action. Every time I have seen
the eyes of someone in need and moved “my wall” I know at the heart of the move was the presence of God in Christ.

**Jesus embodied compassion.** Like the Buddha and Confucius 500 years before him, like Hillel one of the most famous of all rabbis born just before him in 100BCE, Jesus lived and taught the Golden Rule. The Buddha said that we are called deeply into the four immeasurable minds of love. They are “loving kindness” which is friendship for everyone; “compassion” which desires all creatures to be free of pain; “pure joy” which is bliss in following love; and finally, “even mindedness,” which is a love for every being on the planet. Buddha’s close contemporary, Confucius, spoke of the Golden Rule first in the negative form, “Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you.”

Hillel was such a great Rabbi that Jews have named all their college campus centers after this wise and progressive rabbi and thinker. Hillel spoke of the Golden Rule in this way, “What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man. This is the whole Torah and the remainder of it is but commentary. Go study it.”

Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke, “Do to others what you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31). In Matthew’s Gospel he says, “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:31).

600 years later, Mohammed came along and said, “Not one of you can be a believer unless he desires for his neighbor what he desires for himself.” To this day, five times a day, every recitation
of the Quran begins with an invocation to God who is “merciful and compassionate.”

Unfortunately, many people today would rather be right than compassionate. They would rather lift up themselves and their successes than move their walls. They would rather follow the “me first” school of thought than the wisdom of the ages – the sages, prophets and mystics of vast spiritual traditions which do not consider compassion an impractical dream but a way of life and living.

From a word which has its Semitic roots in the womb of a woman – acknowledging compassion comes from the life blood of our mother’s womb – too many people have lost track of our birthright to compassion.

Compassion derives from both the ancient languages of Latin patiri and the Greek pathein – which together mean to “suffer, undergo, or experience.” Compassion means “to undergo or suffer an experience with another person. It means to “be in their shoes,” to “feel their pain” as though it were our own and to “enter with generosity of heart” into another person’s point-of-view. Compassion can be defined as an attitude of principled and consistent altruism (Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life, Karen Armstrong, Alfred Knoepf, New York, NY, 2011, p. 9).

In her 2011 book, Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life, Karen Armstrong calls for all men and women everywhere to
take five steps to live compassionately and thus, help alleviate the suffering of people everywhere. She joined with thousands of global citizens from every religious tradition all who called themselves people of conscience, in five different languages, to draft The Charter of Compassion. Here are the five principles:

*We therefore call upon all men and women:*

1. *To restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion;*
2. *To return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate;*
3. *To ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions, and cultures;*
4. *To encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity;*
5. *To cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings - even those regarded as enemies (Ibid, p.7).*

Moreover, Karen Armstrong goes 12 steps further by giving us 12 practical steps to a compassionate life. Her path to compassion is practical, yet spiritual and philosophical in its grounding.

**First, she says, learn about compassion.** Become educated about the depth and story of compassion.

**Second, look at your own world.** The sages of the past were always applying compassion in the present moment. Jesus’ admonition that the person without sin should cast the first
stone or his parables of faith – all pointed to present day questions and realities.

Third, have compassion for yourself. Rabbi Albert Friedlander, while a prisoner of the Nazis at 8 years old, made a list of all his good qualities, put that list upon his heart, and believed in them in the midst of being daily vilified and hated. Part of the success of “self compassion” is being able to name your shadow side. We often attack others or become defensive in relationship to the qualities we least like in ourselves. Learn to have compassion for yourself and then you can extend it to others.

Fourth, develop empathy. At the foot of the Cross, we meet the Crucified Christ who redeems the world. When our eyes gaze upon the crucified Christ, our hearts break in sympathy and love. Here we meet the interior movement of compassion and it is empathy for the other’s suffering that ultimately saves us.

Fifth, Mindfulness. This is truly recognition of the positives in our lives. Quite frankly, we are torn down by negatives. They wear us down to the bone. Mindfulness helps us name the pain that is within us and in so doing, we have the motivation to change. Mindfulness makes us less anxious about tomorrow. It helps us center in the goodness of this day.

Sixth, Action. One act of kindness can turn a life around. Call it grace. Call it a random act of kindness. Call it what you
will. But, if you want to be a force for good in this world, shield yourself with mindfulness and do not allow another’s destructive tendencies to tear you down. Lighten their lives with acts of friendship and kindness. Remember, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” This action mode is also a pattern changer in your life. Change from resentful to grateful. In the favorite words of Mark Williams, “Choose your attitude.” And if your actions for the day fell flat, go to bed and start again tomorrow.

**Seventh, How Little We Know.** Often we have no idea what the condition of another has been. When I was 20 and 21 years old, I worked in the Housing Projects of St. Louis’ north side. I was given leadership for eight weeks of 75 - 5 and 6 year olds. Although I had junior helpers, I was in charge. I was one of two white people among the children or helpers. There was one five year old who swore all the time. I tried to stop him from cursing, but to no avail. I went to our director and told her about me struggles. She looked at me and said, “James’ mother is a prostitute and his father is a pimp. He lives in an apartment where his mother is turning tricks. He is using the language he knows. So, Mr. Ahrens, why don’t you dedicate yourself to teaching him 8 new words this summer – a word a week? Then you will increase his vocabulary and make a new friend.”

That is exactly what I did and I ended up with a new friend and he had eight new words. How little we know. We need to
recognize and appreciate the unknown and the seemingly unknowable. We need to become sensitive to overconfident assertions of certainty in ourselves and others. We need to make ourselves aware of the spiritual mystery of each human being we encounter. And we need to admit how little we know.

**Eight, How should we speak to one another?** First, before we speak, we need to listen. This will help us hear the pain that surfaces – especially in rage and hateful speech. When my dog Dug goes down the street on a walk or plays in the Dog Park, he tilts his head and tries to hear the pain or anger in the barks of his fellow dogs. You may think this is crazy. But, he has a deep empathy for dogs and people. If Dug can do this, I can do this. You can do this. Let our words reflect listening to the suffering and pain of others. Antagonism will only produce greater contempt, hatred and more antagonism.

**Nine, Concern for Everybody.** In our early days as humans we relied on our tribes to defend and attack others. While tribalism is alive and well and often manifests itself in nationalism, we see repeated time and again this truth: destruction of our neighbor ultimately leads to our own suffering. When the voices of hate or vitriol spew – as they did this week on Iran – we need to come to together and say, “Enough!” We cannot lead our nation or live on this planet with threats being our way to address challenges. What do we know about our enemies and distant neighbors which can help us build
relationships? Compassion seeks to understand more than to be understood.

**Ten, Knowledge.** Like Education, this step calls for to understand the other and their full story. Karen Armstrong ends with a Buddhist poem, “Let all beings be happy!” In this we are reminded that the noblest way of living is to have love in your heart and to cherish all creatures as a mother cherishes her only child.

**Eleven, Compassion calls us to Recognition.** Karen tells the story of Christina Noble who grew up as an abused and neglected child in Dublin, Ireland. As she came out of her home and out of her pain, she chose to become a crusader for children in Viet Nam. She had a Moment of Recognition one day – in which she saw herself and her pain in a child’s face and realized there is no “us” and “them.” There are images of pain everywhere. We are bombarded by suffering. Like Christina Noble, we look suffering in the eye and meet it as an opportunity to embrace the other and show concern for all or we can run away. But, when we run away, compassion stays behind. It has just lost your presence and your elegant being in the moment of greatest need.

**Finally, Compassion calls us to love our enemies.** This is hardest step and the last step. I was asked about it the other day. Do I love ISIS? How about loving Osama Bin Laden? Hitler? Do I love suicide bombers and those who open gun fire on
children and adults in schools, malls and movie theatres? I don’t have all the answers. But, I trust Jesus. I follow him. I listen to him. According to Jesus, loving our enemies is our greatest act of compassion. We are called to love our enemies and offer the wicked man no resistance. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Only goodness can drive out evil and only love can overcome hate.” Love under extreme circumstances brings us to the ultimate place of making room for the other in our lives. As we reach the 12th step, we have moved far along the path of compassion. But, the journey is long and we have miles to go before we sleep.

I pray that we may we covenant one with another to restore compassion and the hard work of love to center of our lives in these times filled with vitriol and angst. So, let’s move our walls in the work and way of compassion. Perhaps we begin to move our walls by simply learning one new word a week for compassion. And that is enough for now. Amen.

*This sermon draws its wisdom from the writing on Karen Armstrong on Compassion, Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life, Alfred Knoepf, New York, NY, 2011.