

“Nothing Spooky About it: Compassion Breeds Hope”

Isaiah 1:10-18; II Thessalonians 1: 1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10

**Part eight of the sermon series,
“Revive Us Again: A Return to Jesus’ Original Program”**

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio, October 30, 2022, Reformation Sunday, Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 26, dedicated to all who seek revival, all who seek to follow Jesus' Original Program, to our nine new members, to our amazing staff, to all the church leaders who brought us this far in 2022, to our amazing witnessing stewards Greg Halbe, Chris Glaros, Jonathan Miller, to our First Reflectors, Marty Worth, Chris Glaros and Martha Wilson and always to the glory of God!

“Nothing Spooky About it: Compassion Breeds Hope”

Isaiah 1:10-18; II Thessalonians 1: 1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10

Today is the final sermon in our Sermon Series, “Revive Us Again: A Return to Jesus’ Original Program.” Inspired by Gregory Boyle’s book, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*, this series opened on September 11th. It was my hope and prayer that focusing on the vision of the power of Radical Kinship found in Jesus that we would all experience revival and renewal. Through faith, hope and especially love, we have explored many understandings of Jesus’ vision. These elements have been forgiveness and healing; humility (or Smelling Like the Sheep); Inclusion – with Jesus as the #1 Includer; Tenderness and Love, Being Present as we Live in the Here and Now; living with Endless Gratitude; and today, Compassion. Plus, Rev. Samuelson added her beautiful sermon on transitions entitled, “On the Way.” I hope this series has brought a revival of your spirit as we have sought to return to key elements of Jesus’ Original Program.

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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.

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Luke's Gospel speaks of Zacchaeus as a "small" man. Besides being short, Zacchaeus was "small" in the way his range of dealing with other human beings. He had severely taken advantage of the people around him. As a tax collector, he was exacting and unforgiving in collecting what was owed him – gouging the poor in unrelenting ways. He was a "little" man – inside and out.

Luke 19 tells us he climbed a tree to see Jesus. Who knows, he may have been getting out of the way of the crowds he had abused through his relentless tax collecting measures. Jesus spotted the "little man" up a tree. He called him out of the tree and ended up going to his house for a meal (an unpopular action by any measure). As you all know, Jesus loved eating with others. And since he had no money, free meals were a necessary part of his keeping alive and keeping going. And it must have been a great dinner party because in the end, Zacchaeus turned his life around – giving back half of all his possessions to the poor (read just about everyone in the region!) and granting four times that amount to anyone he had defrauded. He turned his life around by all measures! On that day, this man was measured in new and rewarding ways. He was headed to heaven on the nonstop train from hell!

In his book, *The Measure of a Man*, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote: "*The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in*

moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." The measure of a person is where that person stands in times of challenge and controversy – wow! Those words have certainly measured each one of us in 2022. They also were immeasurably true for Jesus and the little man of Galilee named Zacchaeus. In the measure of each of them as men, each ended up giving all they had for all around them. They stood in the face of challenge and controversy and gave their full measure of devotion and resources. They both enriched lives through their resources – one of healing and teaching, the other making right with measures of economic justice. They both were compassionate – each in their own ways.

The word compassionate comes from the Latin – “*pati*” which means “to suffer” together with the prefix “*com*” means “with” – “to suffer with.” To be compassionate means to recognize the suffering of others and then to take action to help. Compassion embodies a tangible expression of love for those who are suffering. Compassion is different than empathy. Empathy is the ability to relate to another person’s pain as if it was your own. Empathy, like sympathy, is grounded in emotion and feeling, but empathy doesn’t have the active component which compassion does. It is heart, but not action. Compassion is action and heart.

In his book, Fr. Gregory Boyle tells the story of one of his Homeboys leading worship one Sunday morning. As he read the opening words of the liturgy, he accidentally replaced the word “exaltation,” with “exhaustion.” It sounded like this, “We gather to praise and worship God, the God of exhaustion.” There is so much truth in this. Our **Exhausted God** must look at us and wonder,

“What is going on? What have I done? My beautiful children fight each other and kill each other. They totally exhaust me.”

There's something about an “Exultant God” which leaves us hollow inside. But we can really relate to an Exhausted God, can't we? Our Exhausted God is full of compassion and love. Our Exhausted God stays up all night with us when we rock our babies, when we meet the homeless poor on the steps of our church, when we are fretting about the struggles our children and grandchildren face, the pain of those we know are suffering unto death. Our Exhausted God is full of compassion and is not really into being exalted as long as even one of God's blessed children is hurting, or hungry or up a tree.

On this Reformation Sunday, let us look to the compassionate words and efforts of those who set us on this path of faith – remembering that compassion embodies action. I came across an interesting article on how Martin Luther cared for those with mental illness. While doctors wanted to put schizophrenics away and label them as evil, Luther would spend time knowing their history, listening lovingly, taking their situations and their souls seriously. In one case, Luther met a man who was melancholic and refused to eat or drink and hid in a cellar – turning away all charitable helpers saying, “don't you see I am a corpse and have died? How can I eat?” Luther brought this man into the light and into the care of the community. He reintegrated him into society using his personal relationship with the man. He called it “compassionate reintegration.” Rather than stigmatizing, Martin Luther integrated. God was a little less exhausted because one man cared for another.

John Calvin was seen by most as stern and uncaring – a man who lived in his head to the detriment of his heart. But if you examine

his own letters, you will find that he was deeply moved by human suffering. Reflecting on the suffering of people in Geneva, the death of his wife, and the need for generosity for refugees coming into Geneva, John Calvin spoke from the heart, time and time again. It was tenderness and compassion that permeated the whole of Calvin's soul.

Perhaps it is time to remember the greatest measure of compassion offered the world – in both Jewish and Christian scriptures (and found somewhere in every world religion). We call it “The Golden Rule.”

The Golden Rule is THE critical centerpiece for Faith in Action as Christians and Jews. Moreover, The Golden Rule is a guide that should direct every human being in relationship to every other human being. The Golden Rule calls us to “treat other people the way we want to be treated ourselves.”

In Matthew 7:12, Jesus says, “So in everything, **do to others what you would have them do to you**, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” The Gospel of Luke boils it down more, “**Do to others as you would have them do to you**” (Luke 6:31). In Leviticus, the law of Moses reads, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people but **love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord**” (Leviticus 19:18).

Somewhere in the politics of fear and distain which we see and hear all around us today, the Golden Rule has been lost and forgotten. It is time to resurrect the Golden Rule for each of our lives. It is certainly time to bring back the Golden Rule back for the 2022 elections – not to mention the call to compassionate daily living and action for each and every day of our life!

As Pope Francis reminded us during his historic address to Congress in September of 2015 – the Golden Rule always has political implications and requires action. Pope Francis said:

This Rule points us in a clear direction. Let us treat others with the same passion and compassion with which we want to be treated. Let us seek for others the same possibilities, which we seek for ourselves. Let us help others to grow, as we would like to be helped ourselves. In a word, if we want security, let us give security; if we want life, let us give life; if we want opportunities, let us provide opportunities.

Near the end of his book, Fr. Gregory Boyle tells of a Lifer at the Lancaster Prison in California. Inside the prison, he had discovered that **compassion breeds hope**. Each of us is called by our Exhausted God to create an environment where an optimal healing process can take place; an environment where a person can truly be helped to thrive in this world. Or in Fr. Boyle's words, "A community so loving that everyone feels like they are wearing a parachute" (p. 199).

When we seek first the kinship of God, we will come to know the fullness of God's love. As the apostle John wrote, "if we walk in the light, we will have fellowship with each other." Let us "suffer with" each other and all who inhabit this fragile planet of ours. Let us live the Golden Rule in all our daily dealings.

On this Eve of All Hallows' Eve, let's remember – there is nothing spooky about this – Compassion Breeds Hope. So, let us all walk in the Light of our Exhausted God and be in fellowship together – now and always. Amen.

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