

COMPASSION AND THE CRAZY WISDOM OF JESUS

or

ONE PERSON'S WAY TO TRANSFORM THE WORLD

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I am grateful for and indebted to the work of Stephen Gilligan, Ph.D. for the following understanding of compassion. He presented it as a brief aside during a lecture on Ericksonian hypnosis. At the same lecture in another aside he said: "People don't want to be changed, they want to be blessed." I have long since forgotten the rest of the lecture but the teaching on compassion and the notion of blessing rather than changing people has stayed with me and become a core part of my understanding of ministry. I am also indebted to Steve Andreas and Steve Lankton for their ideas on certainty, confusion, and transformational learning, presented at other lectures at the same Erickson conference, that have informed my understanding of compassion and transformation. For I have come to discover that compassion, and being a compassionate presence is the way to be a genuine blessing and agent of transformation in the world.

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INTRODUCTION

For Christians love is the primary mode of transformation in the world. Yet the word love in our English usage can connote many things from radical caring of others, to sharing in erotic pleasure, to expressing interest in something such as loving chocolate. With such diverse usage the idea that love is the mode of transformation loses a lot of its emphasis and power. Buddhist writings teach that compassion is the genuine pathway to transformation and this appears to be more in keeping with Jesus' understanding of love. The Webster's dictionary definition of compassion is: *"a sympathetic consciousness of others' distress, together with a desire to alleviate it."* The word compassion in short form means to *share suffering*. The sympathetic consciousness arises out of an empathetic understanding of the others' pain.

In reflecting on the Buddha's teaching though one can ask: "Is compassion the only response for every human situation?" Another way of asking this question would be: "Were there times when Jesus or Buddha were compassionate and times when they

were not? Was Jesus compassionate towards the money lenders in the temple?" A simple understanding of compassion would probably say no. Likewise, how could one be compassionate or sympathetic toward someone who is destroying or denigrating other human beings? This short treatise on compassion seeks to expand such simplistic notions of compassion and provide models for people in ministry to be compassionate agents of transformation.

This understanding is also grounded in the notion that all human faculties need to be redeemed, even the human faculty of love or compassion needs to be redeemed. One of the dangers of simplistic, black and white thinking is to assume that some human behaviors are righteous while others are not. A more comprehensive view of humanity would suggest that all human behaviors, character, and personality needs to be redeemed or transformed. For example, even our capacity to love, needs to be redeemed from self interest and liberated from all the fear-based conditions we place on who and how we will love. Until we are as liberal with God's love as Jesus was then our ability to love needs ongoing transformation. As we explore the nature of compassion we will see that all the faces of compassion need to be transformed so that we don't offer a simplistic and inappropriate response to the multitude of human conditions we encounter.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

There are two basic types of learning, transactional and transformational. The simplest is transactional learning which results in a linear incremental process of learning. This is the type of learning that occurs when we acquire new skills or competencies by sequentially building on old skills. Transactional learning often results from the transactions between a teacher and student. In this type of learning what changes is our ability to perform a task. Each new ability is built stepwise upon the foundation of a previously learned ability. On the other hand what does not change in this type of learning is our view of ourselves and the world in which we live. In transactional learning we learn new skills but we are not changed, nor transformed.

Transformational learning is often very different to transactional learning. What changes is the way we view ourselves and the world in which we live. In transformational learning we may not learn how to perform a new skill, but we learn a new way of offering the skills we already have. We also discover that when we change the way we view things, the things we view begin to change without our effort to make them change. Spiritually, this type of transformational learning is called enlightenment, conversion, or "being born again." It is a radical shift in perspective or consciousness that opens up new possibilities that previously seemed to be unattainable or even unthinkable. It is also a non-linear process that at times may not appear logical.

Transformational learning also differs from transactional learning in that transformation is generally preceded by a period of confusion. The confusion occurs because the old map of reality, or the way of viewing ourselves and the world, no longer accurately depicts the new reality that we are beginning to perceive. For a period we may know that the old

map no longer works but the new map has not taken form in our consciousness. For some this confusion may occur momentarily and dramatically such as St. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, for others the confusion may last months or even years and is akin to John of the Cross' dark night of the soul - a time of great aridity when all the things one depended on to make sense of the world are stripped away and no longer make sense, yet the new way of seeing has not yet occurred. The wise teacher, coach, mentor or agent of transformation will seek to manage the student's confusion. Too much comfort and complacency through easy and simplistic answers will result in little confusion and consequently little transformation. On the other hand too much confusion will overwhelm the student and render them immobile in a world that has no clarity and makes no sense. As a means of self-preservation they are likely to withdraw from the world and the learning process.

The enemy of transformation is certainty or rigid thinking which in religious circles is known as dogmatism. Certainty results in the belief that we are smarter today than we will be tomorrow. Transformational learning requires the capacity to doubt. We need the ability to stand back, to reflect, and to ask thoughtful questions. This requires that we have the strength of mind to be able to doubt what we know, for if we are certain that what we know is true then we will never learn anything new. Doubt can be transformative if we apply it to the right things. For example, having people doubt their certainty that they are unlovable can be wonderfully liberating. Managing doubt is similar to managing confusion - not too much and not too little.

It is transformational learning that enables new ways of seeing that will bring lasting change to individuals and groups of people. Imagine that we desire to bring peace to two conflicted groups. No amount of training in the skills of mediation, negotiation and collaboration will be helpful as long as the two conflicted groups view each other as enemies. In fact the two groups will use these skills to pursue their aim of winning the conflict. Peace will only come when the two groups are able to let go of viewing each other as enemies and find some common understanding that enables them to transcend the world of winning and losing to work toward a common goal of mutual betterment. In the following pages we will reflect on Jesus' interactions with others and explore the three faces of compassion to discover how compassion can be the pathway to transformation.

THE THREE FACES OF COMPASSION

Tenderness

The first and most obvious understanding of compassion is tenderness toward another who is in pain. Tenderness is grounded in empathy and results in a desire to nurture and care for those in distress. Our capacity for tenderness does need to be redeemed. There may be times when we are more interested in appearing caring than genuinely caring for others; there may be other times when we use tenderness as a means to manipulate the behavior of others; or there may be times when we simply hide our tenderness because we are afraid that we might appear weak; or we may refuse to

follow the tenderness in our heart because we have been hurt by others. Regardless of the reason our basic caring response to others needs continual transformation and the result of that transformation is a growing sense of caring, a genuine desire to help rather than injure, to nurture rather than overpower, to bring comfort to those in distress, and to seek mutual benefit rather than the gratification our own egocentric desires.

We can think of times when Jesus was tender. Many of the healing stories in the Gospels show the tender side of Jesus' compassion. One of the most powerful examples of Jesus' tenderness was his words to his mother and beloved disciple from the cross. As he was in the midst of dying and leaving them, he entrusted the two that he loved into each others care.

How can tenderness enable transformation? Imagine you are a leper in Jesus' day. You have been told that you are unclean and unacceptable. You probably have also been told that this affliction has been visited upon you by God as a punishment for your sins. The leprosy is a graphic sign that you are outside the realm of God's love. You carry a small bell to ring and warn people to stay away because you are unclean and you pose a great risk to others. Along the road comes Jesus, the holy man, the man people believe has come from God. You desire his touch yet you also know it is your duty to warn him to stay clear. You ring your bell but he keeps coming closer. You ring your bell again and again, louder and louder, and cry out "unclean, unclean". Yet he still comes closer. In fact he reaches out his hand and tenderly touches you. Now there is great confusion and you are confronted with a decision. "Am I unclean, unacceptable and outside God's love or am acceptable and within God's love? Would the holy man touch someone who is beyond God's love?" The confusion exists because your whole world of understanding has been turned upside down. That simple touch did something that no amount of conversation or argument over your feelings of alienation could do? That small act of tenderness has transformed your view of yourself and world in which you live. Nothing will ever be the same again.

However there are times when tenderness is inappropriate. It is inappropriate to be tender in the face of evil. It is inappropriate to stand by and tenderly watch someone hurt another. When we think of Jesus interactions with people there were times when he was far from tender. And so we need, if compassion is to be a useful way of transforming the world, something more than tenderness.

Fierceness

Why did God give us the capacity to be angry? Anger gives us the energy or motivation to fight injustice. Yet it is clear that our human capacity for anger often creates injustice rather than fights injustice. We are well aware of the Biblical admonition that human anger can not work the righteousness of God. This is where we clearly see the need to have our natural human capacity redeemed and transformed. When our capacity for anger is redeemed we become fierce. It is this quality of fierceness that we see in the prophets of the Old Testament in their cries for justice and an end to the oppression of the poor. Fierceness results in a quality of single-minded, determined action. Nothing

will sway the fierce pursuit of the objective. It is the fierceness of a mother lion as she protects her young, that would cause her to give her life in the pursuit of safety for her cub. It is that same quality of fierceness that can be heard in the preaching of Martin Luther King. His preaching has a quality of fierceness that differentiates it from simply being an angry tirade against racial injustice. It is not an angry rail against an evil, but the single-minded, passionate, determined longing for a day when equality for all will reign and a call to make that day a reality. It was that same fierceness that caused him to pursue that dream of equality that even the threat and reality of death would not deter him from his course of action.

We can think of times when Jesus was fierce. The money changers in the temple is a clear example. Also, "get behind me Satan." Said to Peter this interchange is another example of Jesus' single-minded determination to go to Jerusalem regardless of the danger. In many of his interactions with individuals in distress, while he was clearly tender, there is also a fierce quality of not settling for simple answers or solutions that don't touch the underlying self-denigrating perceptions.

How does fierceness enable transformation? Fierceness often presents information in a passionate manner that makes it unavoidable. It can dramatically and radically confront the certainty in our minds and raise the possibility of an alternative view. Too much drama will result in the ideas being dismissed as those of a ranting angry person. Too little drama or passion and the ideas can be dismissed as having no significance or importance. Fierceness and single minded determination can also evoke confusion when set in the context of prior action. Think of Jesus' encounter with Peter when Jesus tells him, "get behind me Satan." This occurs just after Peter has proclaimed that Jesus is the Messiah and that Peter is blessed of God for being able to see Jesus in this way. Now Peter is likely to be confused, things are not quite like he thought and so his understanding of Jesus continues to be transformed. It is interesting to note in this regard that the disciples' understanding of Jesus always had an element of confusion or not knowing. It is the nature of the Divine to call us into a mystery, not a certainty within our minds, and there will always be an element of ambiguity or confusion because it is not for humanity to have an absolute map of God's reality.

But if we are to think of compassion as having only tenderness or fierceness we will probably find ourselves burning out with all the seriousness of life. We will also find that simply being tender or fierce doesn't always work. There are clearly times when tenderness in the face of evil is inappropriate, yet being fierce in some of these circumstances also seems to aggravate the situation rather than lead to transformation. It is also clear from the reading of the Gospels that there were times when Jesus was not simply being tender or fierce. So we need another facet to our understanding of compassion.

Mischievousness

At first glance mischievousness may seem inappropriate to our understanding of compassion. Our common usage of the word often conjures up the image of a three-

year-old getting into all kinds of mischief or trouble. The dictionary describes mischievousness as causing injury or harm and having a quality of malevolence. Upon reflection I think the word does capture an essence of the Gospel and offers insight into the nature of compassion. Firstly, we can think of the malevolence of the Gospel. I am sure that the rich, young ruler Jesus encountered found the Gospel malevolent. Likewise the authorities found Jesus preaching so malevolent that they sought and accomplished his death. Some of the hearers of Dr. King found his ideas very malevolent and were afraid that they would experience great harm if his dream for a day when little black children and little white children would go to school together became a reality. It is clear that the Gospel does come to "harm" the status quo of injustice. What would happen if this human capability for mischief were redeemed?. What would happen if people could recapture the innocence and curiosity of a three year old who knows no limitation to the bounds of curiosity and knows only wonder at the finding of a new discovery?

When we look at Jesus' ministry we also see there was an indirect or hidden quality to much of his preaching and interaction with others. The parables, for example, are veiled communications full of paradox and mixed messages. He told people not to tell others about what he was doing. Rather than hide his message this seemed to ensure that everyone was talking about him and his miracles and raised the idea in people's minds that he might be the Messiah

Tenderness and fierceness tend to be linear and transparent. Mischievousness is non linear and it is often unclear to the recipient. If you move someone from one perspective to another in a tender or fierce way the person will know exactly what you did and how you helped. If you mischievously change someone's perspective they will often have little idea how the change was accomplished. All they will know is that things have changed. It is for this reason that mischievous interventions, such as using paradoxical intention, result in questions of ethics and charges of manipulation. "Is it ethical to get someone to do something without their knowing how you got them to?" Jesus clearly did. The answer to the ethical dilemma is to ask whether the outcome is what the person truly wants and to practice equanimity, a holding lightly to the desired outcome so the person always has their freedom to pursue their deepest God given desires.

KNOWING WHEN TO DO AND BE WHAT

How do we know when to be tender, fierce or mischievous? There are four steps in the dance of being an agent of transformation: joining, setting goals, associating resources and monitoring co-created outcomes.

Joining

As an agent of transformation we need to incarnationally join the person or group on their journey. It is their journey and we need to enter into their world and join them rather than drag them to our world and our journey. If we do not join, all of our actions will be perceived as an act of arrogance or condescension and we will be prone to violently inflict our "blessings" on others. A failure to join is one of the leading causes of

resistance because it continues to maintain a "them and us" reality. Tomas Hora, M.D. made the comment that "unsolicited solicitude is trespass." It doesn't really matter what our intention is, if the assistance isn't invited and provided from a place of mutual valuing and appreciation, it will be perceived as a trespass and will be resisted and resented. Accurate empathy is a necessary skill to facilitate the joining process. It is out of the grounded, empathetic response that we can access our desire to be of help to the other and offer it in a manner that will be accepted. Out of the empathetic joining will come the first notions of what is needed and how it can be accomplished.

Setting Goals

Where does the person being helped want to get to? What is their goal or desire? The goal may be a specific destination or it may simply be an altered emotional state, such as being comforted when distressed. Beyond the simple question of what the person needs or wants other questions arise. What would be genuinely helpful? Will the accomplishing of their desire leave them in a place of greater love, joy, peace, patience? Will it liberate or further confine? Will it bring healing or further alienation? All of these questions float in the air as the helper co-determines the goal with the person being helped. Sometimes it is impossible to know whether the person is pursuing a goal that will really have a beneficial outcome, ultimately it is their life, their journey and they will have to accept responsibility for the outcome. Sometimes the goal is not clearly articulated as the person has no other goal than comfort in the midst of distress. The goal can also take two forms: a specific destination or the process by which the journey to the destination will be undertaken. At some point the helper needs to make a decision. The person is at A and needs to get to B. The next and most important question is: What resource do they need to get from A to B?

Associating Resources

One way of viewing a problem is to see it simply as a situation which has insufficient resources associated to meet the need. The solution is to associate the necessary resources to that need. If we are going on a plane flight from A to B then one of the resources necessary will be the money for the plane fare. When the resource of money is appropriately associated to the flight the journey is made possible. In most human situations the most important resources are not external tangible things but internal attitudes such as hope, confidence, trust, love. One of the more important internal resources people need is the willingness or ability to ask for external assistance. Many people do not accomplish their goals because they are unable to appropriately ask for assistance. Another important internal resource that is often overlooked is confidence. If the person is about to take the trip but is afraid of flying the resource they need is confidence. When frightened people often stay trapped in the fear by spending their time and energy trying to discover the cause of their fear rather than accessing their resource of confidence. When we observe Jesus' ministry we rarely see him offering tangible resources to help another nor do we see him engage in explorations of causes of their problems. Most of the time he was offering help through creating internal associations to

a new way of looking and being in the world that made the person more resourceful in dealing with their lives and community. So having co-create goals with the person or organization we then implement a strategy to associate the necessary resources to the goal to enable them to be achieved.

Monitoring Co-Created Outcomes

Once you have a goal and implement the strategy, pay attention to outcomes not intentions. We live in a culture that pays little attention to outcomes and having a good intention is often seen as a perfect excuse for any injury inflicted on another. Our intention to be helpful is laudable, but if it evokes a negative outcome for someone the intention is of little value. As we interact with others, we need to pay attention to the outcome of the interaction. Is the outcome what we want and is it genuinely a good outcome for the other? If doing what you are doing is not getting you both to a place of mutual blessing then you have two choices. Stay committed to your course of action and do it harder in the hopes that it will work, or try something else. Regardless of your intention, when staying committed to your course of action escalates a negative outcome it is clearly time to try something different. The people of Alcoholics Anonymous know this in their definition of insanity, the continual doing of the same thing over and over again and each time expecting a different outcome. If we want a different outcome then we need to do something different. This often occurs when dealing with rebellion. Telling a rebellious, promiscuous teenager not to engage in sexual activity will increase the promiscuity not reduce its frequency. The more you tell a rebellious person not to do the rebellious act and punish them for their rebellion, the more the rebellion will increase. This is the great dilemma of St. Paul in the letter to the Romans. The more he lives in fear of divine punishment and the harder he tries to do right, the worse his behavior gets. It is only the radical mischievousness of divine grace, the Good News that God's love is greater than his capacity to sin, that will set him free from his inner rebellion. This is totally opposite of our human thinking that we have to earn God's love and through our own actions be found worthy of grace.

Putting the Four Steps Together

These four steps of joining, setting goals, associating resources, and monitoring outcomes are not specifically sequential steps but are a fractal or elementary pattern by which each moment to moment interaction occurs and from which the entire interaction can be observed. Initially the goal is to join, which requires monitoring the outcome to provide a continuous feedback loop to inform the effectiveness of the interaction and development of the next step. The helper may fluidly move from one aspect of compassion to another at each moment of the joining. Once a degree of joining has occurred the next step is to co-create a goal that both can work toward by discovering the resources necessary to accomplish the goal. Monitoring the outcome of each interaction will inform the helper whether the most effective face of compassion is being used.

In general, be tender in the face of pain, be fierce in the face of injustice, and

mischievous in the face of resistance or immobility. It is also apparent that whenever compassion is present all three faces will be manifested in some simultaneous manner. From a place of tender caring the helper may be fiercely determined not to let the suffering continue and resort to a mischievous approach to enable that transformation. Such patterns of compassion are clear in Jesus interactions with those he encountered.

LEARNING THE THREE FACES OF COMPASSION

Most people can do two of the three faces of compassion really well with the third always representing a growing edge. For example, a person may grow up in a house where anger is forbidden and as a result they have never been mentored in appropriate uses of anger. They will find it difficult to be fierce. They will second guess their fierceness or apologize for their fierceness or simply refuse to be fierce when required. Likewise a person may have grown up in a household where tenderness was seen as a sign of weakness and an opportunity to take advantage of another. Showing the tender face of compassion is now difficult because it evokes all of these misperceptions of tenderness and leaves the person feeling uncomfortably vulnerable. Others may have never been allowed to develop the playful curiosity that mischievousness requires. Regardless of which you find difficult, be assured that they are all competencies that can be learned and also need to be continually redeemed and transformed.

Because of their linear, transparent nature tenderness and fierceness are more easily learned. Mischievousness on the other hand is more subtly making it more difficult to learn. Because it is often indirect or hidden mischievousness also needs to be watched carefully. If you are unable to delight in the other and cherish them as a person then avoid using mischievousness. Without an underlying tender concern for the other's well-being, mischievousness will simply be a cruel, cynical, belittling joke at their expense. Under these circumstances it will not be an act of compassion nor will it be an agent of transformation for unlike tenderness or fierceness, mischievousness is often hidden and a person can easily be blind sided or taken unawares in a manner which will further their alienation and suffering.

There are several things to do in order to practice the mischievous face of compassion. One is to reflect on times when you have known curiosity, wonder, and playfulness. These are all elements of the mischievous way. Next practice equanimity. While keeping an eye on the outcome do not cling to the outcome. Holding rigidly to the outcome will restrict your range of playful options. The mischievous approach is also the way of surprise. If you cling to a specific outcome there is no room for surprise. How can God surprise you with grace if you already know the outcome?

Another is to learn to tease or have your capacity to tease redeemed from the callous versions that delights in the misfortune of others. The type of teasing that is required is that which teases out elements of uncertainty in the midst of rigid thinking. Re-read many of Jesus' encounters with people and look for elements of teasing, of quizzically challenging certainty. His encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, or Nicodemus are examples of mischievous teasing to enable transformational thinking. The

other great role model of this type of mischief is the television detective Colombo. He presents himself as a bumbling, confused person who doesn't understand what has happened. His questions appear to evoke more confusion than clarity. It is this type of teasing mischief that would cause an Interim Pastor to look bewildered at a congregation and say: "You know I'm a little confused..... Let me get this straight..... You value that you are a welcoming parish..... But what has got me wondering, if you are a welcoming parish..... why did it take me half an hour to find the door to the church after I parked in the parking lot?" Such an approach is very different from an accusatory tone: "You guys need to get real. I know you think you are welcoming but I've got to tell you, you don't know anything about welcoming, Have you guys ever notice you can't even find the church door from the parking lot." The latter approach will evoke defensiveness, further rigidity of thought, and will strengthen their blind belief that they are welcoming. Conversely, the mischievous approach will evoke doubt and questioning about whether they are welcoming which in turn will open doors to further examination of other aspects of how they welcome or discourage attendance.

Using paradox is another large part of the mischievous way. Buddhists call this "crazy wisdom." Divine grace is an example of paradox. St. Paul tries hard to stop his sinful behavior only to find it getting worse, yet when he surrenders his attempt to control the behavior he discovers that grace sets him free. Alcoholics know this same phenomena in the first step of recognizing they are powerless over alcohol and in the second step of discovering a power greater than themselves that can restore them to sanity. For St. Paul, the alcoholic, and all humanity, this the great dilemma. "If I stop the bad behavior then God will love me: If I keep doing the thing I hate God will not love me." Yet part of us knows that controlling the behavior is beyond our ability. This knowledge is likely to plunge us into deep despair for we will believe that since we cannot control the behavior we will never experience the love of God. Only when humanity surrenders their willful attempt to control God's love will we know the freedom that comes from the Divine. For the alcoholic or sinner this means giving up the search to get God to bless their plan of sobriety or sanctification and become one with God's sobriety and sanctity.

Part of the paradoxical way is to encourage the person to engage in the problem behavior at an increased frequency and at the same time to "tweak" the meaning of the behavior. For example, imagine a person who has been raised in a very strict controlling religious home. Every time they misbehave they are told that God won't love them because of their behavior. In a desperate attempt to maintain an inner sense of integrity they begin rebelling. They find the one behavior their parents really fear, such as sex, and engage in it in a promiscuous way to the point it becomes an uncontrollable habit. Telling them not to engage in such behavior will increase its frequency because the person knows only to rebel from such commands. The paradoxical way is to tell them to engage in sex with great abandon in fact they need to do it even more, with even greater lust, because only then will they learn that their sexual acting out cannot stop God loving them, for surely if their acting out could stop God loving them then they have become more powerful than God. The second part of the instruction is the tweak. It changes the

meaning of the behavior, which changes their relationship to the behavior and consequently interrupts the rebellious pattern. Telling someone to give up trying to control a problem behavior or to engage in it with greater effort and frequency may appear irresponsible. It would clearly be irresponsible to globally suggest that the answer to promiscuity, unwanted pregnancy, and AIDS is for everyone to engage in indiscriminate sex. However in the specific example of someone who is already engaging in the behavior and is trapped in their rebellion the way of paradox and mischievousness is a powerful means to liberation.

Creating therapeutic stories is another example of mischievousness. All the great spiritual traditions use story telling as part of their healing art. Buddhism makes use of koans. Paradoxical utterances that defy logic yet convey the essence of the mystery of the spiritual journey and the conundrums the student faces on the way. Suffi stories are part of the spiritual teachers tool kit in the Muslim tradition. For Jews and Christians, the rabbis used parables. It seems however that we often miss the point of Jesus' parables. We spend our time in seminaries studying what Jesus really meant and what the parables were about. Yet very few seminary classes are taught on how to construct and tell a parable to meet the needs of a parishioner in distress. Our approach to the parables has always confused me. Why, since Jesus probably spent more time telling parables than using any other pastoral technique, is it we don't teach pastors how to do the same?

A CASE EXAMPLE: JESUS AND THE WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY.

Early in the morning Jesus came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'
John 8:1-11

When we look at Jesus' interactions with the different people in this story we see all the faces of compassion operating. Jesus is tender toward the women, yet fiercely does not want to leave her in this place of victimization. He doodles in the sand, delaying his response while heightening the curiosity of both the woman and those who seek to stone her. He is also confronted with a dilemma. He does not want the people to stone the woman, yet he knows that if he tells them directly and fiercely not to, that they will be

further incited and probably stone both her and him. And so he doodles, silently evoking questions in the minds of the woman and the watchers. "What will he do? How will he get out of this?" And then he responds to the crowd by firstly joining them in their desire. "Sure go ahead and stone her." But then he tweaks the instruction and deftly renders them all impotent to carry out the instruction. "But here is the deal. The first stone must be thrown by the one who is without sin." No one can say he defied the scripture by preventing the stoning, in fact he agreed with their desire to stone her. Or did he?

A CASE EXAMPLE: JESUS AND THE CANAANITE WOMAN

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

Matthew 15:21-28

At first glance this story of Jesus' interaction with a woman whose child is ill seems harsh and cruel. When asked to heal the child Jesus responds; "Its not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Is Jesus really calling her a dog? Is this the language of the man who befriended Samaritans, outcasts, lepers, tax collectors and prostitutes? But seen through the eyes of compassion Jesus is far from cruel as the outcome attests. The woman is a Canaanite she has been told by society that she is unacceptable and outside the community of God. If Jesus had simply done as she requested and healed her daughter this deep alienation would never have been healed. Granted, her daughter would have been healed which is a good thing, but the woman is likely to feel even more distressed because she was not really worthy of the healing and her inner sense of alienation is likely to grow rather than diminish. It is possible she would feel guilt for the healing which would burden her with a sense of obligation or debt to pay for what had been gracefully give. So how does Jesus respond? Firstly, Jesus joins the woman in her self-understanding. Part of her believes what others have told her. She is an outcast, a dog waiting for scraps at a table, so he calls her a dog. But another part of her awakens. She looks him in the eye and says: "You might think I am a dog, but I am worthy of the crumbs that fall from the Master's table." Jesus responds that her faith is great and heals her daughter. The healing is freely given not to confirm her pitiful state in society, but to confirm her inherent worth as a recipient of divine grace.

TWO EXAMPLES OF MISCHIEVOUSNESS IN PARISH MINISTRY

When I met Muriel she was recovering from a head injury that had left her able to walk with some hesitancy. One arm was somewhat paralyzed and although for a time she

had speech problems by the time I met her she had recovered sufficiently to be able to clearly think and converse. She was in her seventies and had returned to church attendance with her husband Albert following a thirty five year absence. Muriel was a classic Martha, a caregiver supreme, who had spent her life taking care of others with little concern for herself. If she had remained in the church I am sure she would have headed the altar guild and the women's guild and the outreach group and any other group that allowed her to care for others. Her accident had radically impaired her ability to care for others and her underlying sense of herself and her worth. As a result she had begun to experience increasing episodes of depression. One day I received a call that Muriel had become very upset and taken to her bed. When I visited her, she was lying in bed crying and saying she just felt useless, unable to care for anyone, and that she just wanted to die. Her husband, Albert, was a delightful, soft hearted, caring man and with great tenderness would say to her that for 50 years she had cared for him and now it was time for him to care for her. Rather than bringing comfort his words brought forth shrieks of lament and tears, because they reinforced her view that she was incapable of caring for others, consequently worthless, and just taking up space on the earth.

It was clear by her response to her husband's tenderness that tenderness would be an inappropriate response to her suffering. She was in great distress, so a fierce response challenging her sense of reality would also have been inappropriate. At the time of this encounter the city in which we lived had recently experienced several episodes of drug runners shooting up neighborhoods with uzi machine pistols. Also in the city were a chain of convalescent-retirement homes called Oak Manor. My response to Muriel was to first join her by acknowledging her distress. "Muriel you have found great meaning through out your life by caring for others.... But now you feel really worthless because the accident has left you unable to help others and care for them like you did in the past..... In fact you feel so worthless that you just want to die....." At each pause she would nod indicating that I had been getting her story right and was joining her in her understanding of her predicament. My goal was not to join her in her desire to die, but to help her find a new way of viewing herself so that she could live with renewed meaning and hope despite her limitations. I did not know what that view would be but I continued, "I imagine that if I were in your situation I would feel the same way, that if I felt really useless and incapable of helping and caring for others I would also just want to die. But here is the thing Muriel, before you die I think you and I need to get some uzis and go down to Oak Manor and just clean the place out. There are people down there that are so useless they can't even care for themselves. People have to dress them and feed them. They are just worthless, taking up space and requiring other people to waste their time by caring for them. So before you die, I think you and I need to go down there with some uzis and clean the place out."

By this time Muriel had stopped crying, she was now angry that I could think that she was capable of such a callous act upon defenseless people who need our caring and not such cruelty. Then she stopped and I could see the light go on in her mind. I didn't need to say another thing or explain what I was saying. She knew what she needed to know,

her perception of herself as worthless was transformed. Several days later she was back in church with her husband and she was clearly back to caring for him even if it was not as robust as she had done in the past. She was however content in her abilities and in herself. She outlived Albert by quite a few years. Some ten years after our encounter she met up with my wife, Kim, at a reunion and said to her, "I will never forget the day Rob came over and screwed my head back on." We never talked about our conversation or what I had tried to mean or say. Good mischief never needs to be discussed or explained. It just floats in the air waiting for the hearer who has ears to hear and who is open to having their perception of reality transformed.

Mischievousness with a Congregation

In many ways congregations are more difficult to work with than an individual because in a congregation you have people at different ends of the spectrum and so what might appear one way to one person will be perceived very differently by others. This however is the great strength of the mischievous way over more direct approaches. A direct approach will cause some to agree and others to disagree and has the effect of polarizing people. When we look at Jesus telling of parables to crowds of people we see that one of the great strengths of the mischievous approach is that you can encompass many different perspectives in one story. This is especially so if the story is left as a story and never explained from the storyteller's perspective. If people get upset with the story they are not really getting upset with the storyteller, rather they are upset with the interpretation that is going on in their own mind. With sufficient, but not too much, ambiguity the Spirit will take the story and make meaning for one person and a totally different meaning for another. The end result is both can be transformed.

One of the parishes I served as an interim focussed most of its energy around its unique way of doing worship. Within the Episcopal tradition our church changed prayer books in the 1970s. While the change was welcomed by many, others strongly resisted the new prayerbook. This congregation was also unique in that not only did they resist the new prayerbook, they also resisted the old prayerbook and instead used an even older prayerbook called the Anglican Missal. When I arrived I was told in no uncertain terms that I wasn't to change one word of their liturgy. The parishioners also voiced great reservation that I had been sent by the diocese to change their liturgy, which in fact, was clearly not the case, but the idea did add to their fearful manner of worship. What concerned me most was not the words but rather the spirit in which the words were said and the way worship was engaged in. The worship was conducted in a judgmental atmosphere where people were fearful of making a mistake and emotional daggers would fly across the sanctuary at any hint of an error. There was no way that anyone could experience transcendence, awe, and Divine hospitality in the midst of such a judgmental atmosphere.

To join the congregation I valued their focus on worship (not the manner of the focus but that underneath this passion was a desire for transcendent worship). My goal was to create an atmosphere of love and acceptance in which people experienced the

transforming hospitality of God. This was also a goal the parishioners could embrace. I believe that while words are important what is more important is that true worship begins when we are speechless in the presence of the One who loves and embraces us. I did fiercely challenge the judgmental atmosphere and playfully suggested that instead of condemning mistakes we had to laugh and delight in them because as a newcomer to their worship I was going to make numerous errors. This all led to incremental changes and improvements in the atmosphere yet to achieve a transformation in their worship would require something different.

One of the steps in developing a mischievous strategy is to get the person or group to perform the problem behavior better and harder while giving a rationale for the increased effort that changes the meaning of the behavior. I decided to get the congregation to engage even more traditionally in their worship and to demand even greater excellence in the way they did their worship. For Pentecost, I invited them to do the entire Mass in Latin using the last of the Latin settings used in England prior to the English translations. We had a good choir who prepared Mozart's Latin Missa Brevis in F Major. We advertised the service, and talked about the beauty of worship that was beyond words. The congregation loved it. The following Pentecost we did the same thing and this time they invited their friends and packed the church. The result was that they loosened their grip on the words of the liturgy and began to enter into a different spirit of worship. When I left they still had a long way to go. They probably wouldn't use the new prayerbook, however that wasn't the real issue. However, the extent of the movement could be seen in the atmosphere of the worship, and that as I left they were looking forward to doing a festival African liturgy with drums and African chant.

Summary

It is clear from observing Jesus' interactions with others in pastoral need that he did not have a "one size fits all" approach to offering his care. In each case Jesus uses an incarnational approach of joining the person where they were and then using a variety of strategies that can be categorized as tender, fierce, or mischievous led them to new places of understanding and action. His way of being a compassionate presence is a model for ministry and how we can transform the world.

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