

An Introduction to Our Lenten Reflections on Compassion

An interesting perspective on the debate and policies towards immigration by Ray Halbritter, who represents the Oneida Indian Nation in Upstate New York. He writes this: *The righteous cause of welcoming deserving immigrants, and recognizing how much you benefit our society, has lasted for generations and will go on for generations ahead. That is not something to lament -- it is something to cherish, because our cause is just.*

It is an interesting perspective but it is the word choice of the Old Testament language: **righteous (ness) and just (ice)** that bridges beliefs.

These two ideas are the foundation of Jewish law for the Old Testament people of God. The ten commandments demonstrated how simple laws guided individual behavior and people living together, speaking to the "thou or you shalt." Jewish dietary laws, known as kosher or kashrut, again help the individual and community to be righteous, clean and pure in daily life. In the Old Testament, **mishpat** or **justice**, calls for the care and cause of widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor. Today, this call includes the refugee, the migrant worker, the homeless, many single parents and elderly people, and as we were reminded, God loves and defends those with the least economic and social power, and so should we. That is what it means to "do justice." (Micah 6:8)

The Old Testament **Tzadeqah** refers to family and society relationships with **fairness, generosity and equity**. **Tzadeqah** or **righteousness** and **mishpat, justice**, are like twins in the Bible. Doing justice includes not only the righting of wrongs but the generosity and social concern, especially toward the poor and vulnerable.

With time and tradition, these laws and codes of conduct became complicated, widely interpreted and controlled much of life. However, Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. (Matt. 5:17).

We are familiar with the "Good Samaritan" parable. Some interpret the refusal of the first two travelers to become involved as fear of becoming the next victims and not wanting to become unclean from involvement with a dead person and, especially for the Jewish priest.

The radical notion of the Good Samaritan's kind of compassion is that it goes beyond the people you know or you have a relationship as it furthers the idea of caring for the most vulnerable of society, be they foreigners, strangers, widows, orphans and the poor. Jesus points out that our urge to help goes to all, even those who don't like us, our enemies. How can we do this? What brings us to that state where we depart from the concern of "I"-- to the "you and me," and to the "we"?

The season of Lent leads to the (com)Passion of Easter and gives us the opportunity to explore our beliefs about the roots of righteousness, justice and compassion, the heart of following Jesus. This self-study, based on the comparative religion writer Karen Armstrong, provides a sense of the universal virtue and value of compassion in the human existence. But do other faiths and culture believe and practice it differently? Or is it all the same? And by examining all these practices of compassion, how can we become more compassionate for the world? Especially important today, because we are all faced with divisive and challenging opinions and politics. How do we respond?



These weekly reflections, readings, and references provide you with the opportunity to consider such questions and give some guidance on how you understand compassion. You are invited to a soup meal on March 19th to share your study experience and on April 2nd to conclude the study. These self-study inquiries and meal gatherings complement the Sunday 7 pm Lenten Compline services, which we encourage you to attend.

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