

A Season of Joy: COMPASSION

Matthew 9:35-38

We are most joyful when we focus on others.

A sermon preached by
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There is an ancient Chinese legend, shared by the Dalai Lama in *The Book Of Joy*, about a farmer whose horse escaped the barn and ran away. His neighbors commented on his bad luck. But the farmer said no one can know what is bad luck or good luck. A few days later, the horse came back, and there was a wild stallion with him. The farmer's neighbors commented on his good luck. Again the farmer said no one knows what is good luck or bad luck. When the farmer's son tried to break the stallion, he was bucked off and broke his leg. The neighbors said, "Bad luck." The farmer said, "Who knows?" A few days later soldiers came into town and took all the able-bodied young men off to fight in a war. But because of his broken leg, the farmer's son was left at home.¹

We can never know whether an experience may bring us bad luck or good luck. Or more correctly, any experience we have may be both good and bad, depending on how we respond.

We are thinking for these few weeks about the pathway to joy, using *The Book of Joy*, about a week of conversations between the Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of the Tibetan Buddhists, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who was at the time the spiritual leader of the Anglican Church in South Africa. Both spiritual leaders have left their mark on the world.

Each week we are examining an impediment to joy, a pillar of joy, and a practice of joy. Before we get to the pillar of joy today, we have to acknowledge the reality of suffering and adversity. This is an impediment to joy. All people suffer hardships, some more than others. We all get sick, have loved ones die, endure conflict in our relationships, worry about the future. Some of us also experience hunger, homelessness, mental illness, divorce, imprisonment, or poverty. Life can be a very bad experience.

But even in the bad experiences of life, there can be good. The verse we often recite has to do with God's ability to bring good out of the evil experiences of life. It's Romans 8:28: "*We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*" Even in the worst of times, God can make good

things happen. The Archbishop and the Dalai Lama offer three good things that come out of suffering and adversity.

Suffering provides an opportunity for growth. Hard experiences change us, but if we are faithful, the change can be for the better.

Nelson Mandela was Desmond Tutu's good friend who was imprisoned for his criticism of the racist *apartheid* regime in South Africa. He entered prison in 1962 as an angry young-ish man (He was 44.) In prison he was treated badly. A trained lawyer, Mandela's prison job was breaking rocks with a sledgehammer. They had no warm clothes in the winter. The Black prisoners were given less food than the other prisoners. Mandela was in prison for 27 years. But when he was released, he came out somehow a kinder, gentler soul. He was ready to forgive his enemies and build a new nation based on equality for all. Suffering can embitter us if we let it, or it can ennoble us. Mandela's friend Tutu said, "One has learned in very many instances, for us to grow in generosity of spirit we have to undergo in some way or other a diminishing, a frustration. You may not always think of it as being so. There are very few lives that just move smoothly from beginning to end. They have to be refined."²

Another benefit of suffering is that it clarifies our experiences of joy. If you have had some bad times, it makes the good times all the more wonderful. To quote the Dolly Parton, "If you want to see the rainbow, you gotta put up with the rain."³ If you're going through a hard time right now, you can either remember a good time in the past and really appreciate it, or you can anticipate something good happening in the future, and you know how good that is going to be. If you're having a good time now, it's all the more sweet because you have known times of pain in the past.

The third benefit of suffering and adversity is the refinement and testing it brings to your inner self. Your soul is tested by suffering, but the hard times can refine your spirit and give it a strength you never knew you had. Think of Jesus being tested in the wilderness for 40 days; he came out stronger and more focused on his mission.

Spiritual strength is like muscular strength, in that it grows stronger through pressure. If you want to get physically strong, you exercise. You lift weights. You press your muscles against some form of resistance. That regular pressure increases strength and muscle mass. Suffering puts pressure on your inner self, and by resisting the pain with good thoughts and actions and reflections, you build up your soul to overcome the adversity.

The Dalai Lama was able to escape into India when the Chinese invaded in 1959. But all were not so lucky. One of his friends, a senior monk named Lapon-la, was captured and sent to a Chinese prison with 130 other Tibetan Buddhist monks. The Chinese learned the art of torture from the Soviet *gulags*, and for 18 years, these monks were starved and frozen and tortured. When they were released, only 20 of the 130 had survived. Lapon-la made his way to India where the Dalai Lama was in exile. He met with his spiritual master and confessed that during those 18 years of suffering, he had faced many dangers. The Dalai Lama acknowledged that his friend had been in danger of losing his life. But Lapon-la replied, "No, I was in danger of losing my compassion for the Chinese guards."⁴

We can learn from suffering and adversity, but the spirit it strengthens within us is the spirit of compassion. We can feel for others because we have suffered. Compassion is a combination of two Latin words that means "suffering with." The more we can suffer with

others, feel their needs and stop focusing on ourselves, the more the pathway to joy will be open.

Compassion is grounded in love. Suffering is focused inward, at our own pain. But compassion is focused on others, on helping others experiencing less suffering and pain. This is the road to joy. Compassion is a fundamental virtue, and it leads to other virtues: courage, kindness, generosity are all generated by our sense of compassion. The Dalai Lama said, "Compassion is what connects the feeling of empathy to acts of kindness, generosity, and other expressions of altruistic tendencies."⁵ In other words, all the good we do is based on feelings of compassion for others. It may seem odd; in fact, the book calls it the "core paradox of happiness."⁶ It's this: We are most joyful when we focus on others, not on ourselves.

Here's another paradox: Compassion for others starts with compassion for ourselves. We have to accept ourselves and love ourselves before we can accept and love other people. Jesus was quoting the wisdom of Moses when he said, "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*"⁷ We can't have compassion for others if we can't accept our own frailties and mistakes and give ourselves a break. We need to be kind to ourselves before we can treat others with kindness. Here's what you do: Love God. Love yourself. Love your neighbor as yourself. That fulfills the great command of Christ.

Compassion is not genetic; it's not something we have or we don't. Compassion is a skill that can be developed. Our human tendency is actually toward self-centeredness, so we have to develop compassion if we are going to have it. It doesn't come naturally. We have what the Dalai Lama calls a "seed of compassion" from our experiences of being cared for by others, but then we grow that seed and expand our compassion and it spreads to others and eventually to all humankind.

That's why Scripture contains so many words of encouragement to be compassionate. If God is love, and love is the basis of compassion, why wouldn't Scripture keep encouraging our compassion? The prophet Zechariah said, "*This is what the Lord Almighty said: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.'*"⁸ Paul says, "*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*"⁹ And again, "*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.*"¹⁰ And Peter writes, "*Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.*"¹¹ You can learn how to do this.

The book and the movie *Same Kind Of Different As Me* tells the story of Ron and Debbie Hall, a wealthy art dealer and his wife whose lives were falling apart. But through Debbie's work at a homeless shelter, and Ron getting involved, and a special friendship with a homeless man named Denver Moore, their lives came together in an amazing way. Compassion didn't come naturally for any of them; it was a hard lesson to learn sometimes. But look what happens when Debbie Moore extends compassion and care to a homeless woman named Clara.¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4r4jGPegHs>.

In all our compassion, we follow the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. His ministry was full of acts of compassion toward the poor, the sick, the grieving, the disabled. In the Gospel of Matthew, the evangelist tells the story of the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7, then there are two chapters, 8-9, with one miracle story after another: healing a skin disease, a centurion's servant, Peter's mother-in-law, two demon-possessed men, a

paralytic, a dead girl, the woman with a bleeding disorder, two blind men and a deaf guy. Then there is this sort of summary statement which characterizes Jesus' ministry: "*Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*" He was a Christ of compassion, a shepherd to their souls, and ours. "*Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'*"¹³

Often we think about that verse in terms of evangelism, winning people to Christ. But it's also a call to be compassionate, just as Jesus was, toward others who are hurting. You see, compassion is contagious. When we act with compassion toward someone, they are more likely to act compassionately toward someone else and someone else and someone else. The circle gets wider. And before long, you get a movement going.

Anthony Ray Hinton was unjustly convicted of a double murder in 1985 and served 28 years on death row in Alabama. Innocent but incarcerated, he was angry and heartbroken. For 4 years, Anthony Ray didn't speak to anybody. But one night on death row, he heard the man in the cell next to him crying. Remembering the compassion of his mother, Hinton asked what was wrong. The other prisoner had just received word that his mother had passed away. Anthony Ray tried to comfort him and cheer him up a little bit, and suddenly he found his voice. For 24 more years, until his conviction was finally overturned by the Supreme Court, he was a source of love in a loveless place, a fountain of joy in the desert of death row. He tried to focus on other people's problems, and at the end of the day, he would discover that he had forgotten about his own.

Over nearly three decades, Hinton watched 54 people—53 men and a woman—walk by his cell on the way to the execution chamber. He got the other inmates to start banging on the bars of their cells five minutes before the execution, not in protest, but in compassion. He said, "I discovered on death row that the other inmates had not had the unconditional love that I had had from my mother. We became a family, and we did not know if they had any other family and friends there, so we were banging on the bars to say to those who were being put to death, 'We're with you, we still love you right up to the end.'"¹⁴ Since his release, Anthony Ray Hinton has been a crusader for compassion, working especially with inmates who have been unjustly convicted.

Our practice of joy today is a compassion meditation.¹⁵ Get yourself in a meditation mode by sitting comfortably and breathing deep, then think of someone you love. Thinking of them, say these lines silently: "May you be free from suffering. May you be healthy. May you be happy. May you find peace and joy." Be aware of the feelings that arise. Imagine a light of love coming from your heart to theirs.

Repeat this exercise for someone you know who is suffering, then for yourself, then, if you're brave, for someone you dislike. Remember that we all want to be happy and free from suffering, as you say the words, "May you be free from suffering. May you be healthy. May you be happy. May you find peace and joy."

Finally offer these words for all the world: "May all beings be free from suffering. May all beings be healthy. May all beings be happy. May all beings find peace and joy." Let the warm feelings of caring, concern, and compassion fill your heart as you continue to breathe.

Everyone has to endure some suffering in life. But suffering can open up wells of compassion. And when we pour waves of compassion on the needs of others, we find joy. This is life as God intended it.

¹ Douglas Abrams, Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama, *The Book Of Joy* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016), 151f.

² *The Book Of Joy*, 152ff.

³ <https://goleansixsigma.com/if-you-want-the-rainbow-you-gotta-put-up-with-the-rain/>.

⁴ *The Book Of Joy*, 155f.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁷ Leviticus 19:18, Mark 12:31.

⁸ Zechariah 7:9-10. NIV

⁹ Ephesians 4:32. NIV

¹⁰ Colossians 3:12. NIV

¹¹ I Peter 3:8. NIV

¹² Ron Hall and Denver Moore, *Same Kind Of Different As Me* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006). Film version of book, 2017.

¹³ Matthew 9:35-38.

¹⁴ *The Book Of Joy*, 261f.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 337.