

A sermon preached on Sunday, July 18th, 2021 based upon Ephesians 2:11-18 and Mark 6:30-34, 53-56, entitled, "The Quiet Center of Compassion".

We human beings have this tendency to divide the world into hostile groups and create identities out of our group affiliations: *Those who are with us, and those who are against us. The good people who see the world correctly; the bad people who speak falsehoods.* At the outset of the Apostle Paul's adult life, his primary distinction was between Jews and Gentiles. And then he encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. This is what Paul discovered in this encounter:

"For (Jesus) is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

In other words, these groups we divide ourselves into, such as liberal and conservative, are ultimately illusions. In Christ we discover that at the deepest level of reality we truly are one.

What would it mean for the way we live if we took this seriously? And what would it mean – as followers of Jesus – to live out the peace he brought into this world?

Turning to our Gospel lesson, we hear a story of what Paul's claim that "Jesus is our peace" looked like on the ground in the course of Jesus' ministry. It begins with the disciples returning from the two-by-two mission trips on which he had sent them.

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. (Here the reading jumps forward, skipping the familiar story of the feeding of the 5000.) When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed. (Mark 6:30-34, 53-56)

I returned yesterday evening from my week with Sarah at the Chautauqua Institute, a unique community located in a beautiful setting by Lake Erie. For well over 150 years, thousands of people have been gathering each summer at Chautauqua. It began with a strongly Christian identity as a place for rest and spiritual renewal. Over time Chautauqua has become increasingly interfaith, extending what takes place there to include the celebration of the arts with concerts and dance recitals, as well recruiting famous authors who present lectures addressing issues of common concern to the human race.

Through the years, each denomination has maintained a house. I applied to go to Chautauqua for a week to serve as the chaplain of “Methodist House” and was accepted. As chaplain I led the Sunday morning worship service, gave a Tuesday noon time lunch lecture on their big beautiful porch, participated in extending hospitality to the visitors throughout the week, and vacuumed the porch every morning. For carrying out these duties, Sarah and I got to spend the week there for free. *(Unfortunately, a week at Chautauqua is rather expensive.)*

Several months ago, I received an email asking me for my first and second choice of weeks to serve. Chautauqua chooses a theme for each week, and promotes in advance the speakers and concerts that each week would feature. Sarah and I looked over the weeks and chose the top two that caught our interest. I promptly emailed my reply.

Except... I had one of those brain fog moments in which by mistake I sent the response to myself rather than to the person in charge of assigning chaplains for specific weeks. Two months ago, I received an email saying there were just two weeks left to choose from – neither of which made our original list of preferred weeks.

Oh well, Chautauqua is a beautiful place, and perhaps God had something in mind for us to experience for the week we ended up choosing.

When we arrived, we found out there had been a late addition to the program offerings, and that of the many possible venues it could take place, it would occur in the chapel of Methodist House. Dr. Barry Kerzin, a Buddhist monk and the personal physician to the Dalai Lama was going to give three talks on subject of *“From Burnout to Compassion.”*

Barry grew up in the United States, went to medical school and embraced Buddhism. Eventually, he travelled to India where the Dalai Lama lives in exile from his homeland of Tibet. For over thirty years, Barry has been one of the Dalai Lama’s closest associates.

There are many Christians who maintain the “dividing wall of hostility” that Paul said Jesus removed by dividing the world into Christians who are saved and everybody else who follow other spiritual traditions with the assumption that there is nothing to learn from practitioners of other religions.

But Barry's presence and the talks he gave – in Methodist House itself, no less -- I came to realize was what God wanted me to experience during this mis-chosen week. Barry has been traveling around the United States talking to groups of nurses and other medical practitioners who have been worn down from having served on the frontlines of the pandemic.

The title of Barry's talk has two obvious connections to the Gospel lesson assigned for this week. First, Jesus is concerned for the fatigue of his disciples who have returned from their missionary journeys, and he leads them apart for some rest and renewal away from the crowds of people. And second, Jesus is described as having "compassion" on the crowds of people who end up interrupting their plans for quiet retreat.

Barry made a distinction in how he understands the words "empathy" and "compassion." As he defines empathy, it involves literally taking on the suffering of another. At times, strongly empathic people can find themselves in danger of drowning in the pain of others in a way that ends up helping no one.

Compassion, as Barry defines it has a subtle distinction from empathy. To have compassion for another does involve feeling something of their pain, and doing what you can to relieve it. But with compassion, a certain distance is maintained that keeps a person from drowning in the pain of another. Compassion involves a clarity that allows one to see the problems of another with some degree objectivity. Understood this way, Barry asserted that there is no such thing as "compassion fatigue."

And so, the challenge in life is in finding the balance – the quiet center we sing about – between empathy on one end and on the other, hardening our hearts to the pain of others.

Barry talked a lot about the Dalai Lama himself, and the description he gave – qualities Barry himself embodied – was a lot like how Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels. Whoever the Dalai Lama is with receives his full attention. In this regard, he makes no distinction in how he relates to a person in regard to their status: the Dalai Lama is just as present talking to the president of a country as he is talking to a member of the cleaning staff of the hotel in which he finds himself staying.

He is a man whose presence conveys peace – the same quality I think that drew the crowds of people to Jesus. There is a light heartedness to the Dalai Lama – he laughs easily. Someone asked Barry how the Dalai Lama maintains his equanimity having witnessed the atrocities the Chinese government has perpetrated on the Tibetan people. Barry said that the Dalai Lama clearly recognizes injustice, and does what he can to stand against it. But in finding the balance of the quiet center, he does not descend into bitterness. He prays for the leaders of the Chinese government every day.

The Dalai Lama embodies humility. My impression of human nature is that adulation and power eventually will go to a person's head, and I asked Barry how the Dalai Lama has avoided pride and arrogance. His answer was that the Dalai Lama knows that the adulation isn't real – it's an illusion. With the great amount of time he spends in meditation – a form of prayer – the Dalai Lama sees through the layers of illusion we human beings are constantly creating – including the illusion of that dividing walls of hostility we create.

In the course of our lives, we create identities for ourselves. These identities are necessary to function in this world, but to some extent they, too are illusions, because the identities we create do not express the fullness of the mystery of who we are.

The identities we generate inevitably involve the divisions we create among people: The good people and the bad people. The people who see life correctly and those who don't. We pride ourselves as belonging in the right group, and as we do, we shut down our capacity to have compassion for people who are in the wrong group. We fail to see their humanity.

Some people have created identities around hostility which is a sorrowful thing, for in doing so they have lost the capacity to feel the compassion that makes us human.

This has been particularly true when the battlefields between people of opposing belief systems are found primarily on the internet. When you can't look into the eyes of another person, it is easy to dehumanize them.

Another speaker I heard at Chautauqua talked about how if you ask Americans whether "facts" can move arguments forward, the vast majority will say yes. And yet putting forth facts simply leads to further disagreement regarding which facts are valid and which facts apply to the argument. There is something, however that can move conversations forward between people who disagree and that is the sharing of experiences.

Another speaker – an MIT professor – talked about a hopeful project he is involved in which brings groups of people across political lines together to participate in small group conversations, focusing primarily on the sharing of personal experiences. Although the result of these gatherings isn't the end of disagreement, it does lead to a greater understanding of where people with whom people disagree are coming from, and a greater capacity to find common ground. As Brene Brown says, *"It's hard to hate people up close: Lean in."*

Another speaker noted that in research involving marriages, the greatest indicator that a marriage will end in divorce is when one or both of the partners began to express "contempt" towards the other – look down on the other from a place of supposed moral superiority. We live in a country in which a great deal of contempt is expressed towards those on the other side of the political divide we have created, and such contempt threatens our democracy.

So let me end by presenting you with some questions for reflection.

Jesus has taken down the dividing wall of hostility. Where is their hostility and anger inside yourself? Inside each of us, there is a dividing wall of hostility we have created that separates parts of ourselves we find unacceptable. This inner hostility undermines our capacity to bring the peace of Jesus into this world.

People sometimes view me as a pastor as someone without any inner hostility. But let me tell you, that perception is an illusion. When I am driving and someone honks at me for what seems like no good reason, rage altogether disproportionate to the honk arises within me. I truly want to hurt the person who honked at me. This is the something for me to look at. Where did such anger come from? Apparently from some long-forgotten humiliations that have nothing to do with the honker.

So, take note of the places where anger and contempt arise within you.

What would it mean for you to find the quiet center, the place of compassion, the balance between what Barry called the empathy that can drown us and the hard-heartedness that turns others into objects and threatens to steal our very soul?

And finally, what would it mean for you to practice compassion towards yourself? Our capacity for self-care is related to our ability to effectively care for others. That which we find intolerable in ourselves will lead us to project it on to others in contempt. The grace of God that the Apostle Paul discovered in Jesus at the place of his inner wretchedness requires that we be gracious towards all that is within us that would tempt us into self-condemnation.