

# Compassion: The Heart of the Gospel

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Compassion is at the core of all spiritual traditions but is often glossed over in favor of doctrine, ceremony and ideology. Why is this? It appears that, individually and collectively, we are dreadfully afraid of facing our pain honestly. We do everything we can to avoid facing the necessary suffering of our life. As a result, we are left with neurotic (repetitive and meaningless) suffering, as C.G. Jung so aptly pointed out. Salvation, liberation, and wisdom are not pain avoided, but pain confronted and transformed. What this means in real life is that we only experience our authentic humanity when we live in the truth of our limitations, accepting that we can't always have it our way. For some, this may translate as accepting the aging process or a particular weakness as an ongoing part of our personality, or a betrayal by our best friend. Accepting the reality does not change it, but it changes our attitude, which in turn *changes us*. This is the work of transformation, salvation. Christ is the model of this necessary work. This is why the symbol of the cross is the central symbol of Christianity—to remind us of this continuing work.

The word compassion comes from a Latin word that means “to suffer with” but, unlike the concepts of empathy or patience, compassion goes a step further and also seeks to *actively* alleviate that suffering in some way. This dual meaning is why compassion is at the center of all major world religions. The message is clear: we act and are acted upon by the reality of suffering. As the Dalai Lama says, “Compassion is of little value if it remains an idea. It must become our attitude toward others, reflected in all our thoughts and actions.” Ideally this leads to a deeper education in wisdom.

The Christian word for this work is salvation: loving no matter what comes our way. What a challenge! This is summarized in the 5-step liturgical process called the Paschal Mystery, otherwise known as “how to deal with pain”:

1. Good Friday: life is lost, which leads us to lament and ponder
2. Easter Sunday: new life is given, which leads us to receive a different reality
3. 40 Days: a period of adjustment to the new reality
4. Ascension: letting the old way ascend and bless us in some way
5. Pentecost: moving forward, empowered with a new Spirit

Of course this enumerated list is just for clarification; in reality, it is much more complicated and convoluted, with each stage taking on its own time line and challenges. I remember the story of a Canadian man who was a popular high school athlete and the pride of his small town. He was able to secure an athletic scholarship to a prestigious college and did quite well. However, he never made the professional level in hockey, languishing in the semi-pros for several years until he had a career-ending injury. He returned to the same small town and married his high school sweetheart, procuring his old job as a stock clerk. As the years unfolded, he kept talking about getting in shape

and returning to hockey. This didn't help him, especially as others kept encouraging him as well. This man lived in a world of make-believe until one day, through the intervention of a friend, he finally accepted that his dream of becoming a professional hockey player was dead. He then slowly proceeded to make his way through the tattered remains of this dream, reflecting on what he really wanted to do with his life. He quit his job, went back to school, earned another degree and went to work in a completely different field. This man and his wife also started counseling to repair the damage that this dream had caused in their relationship. Today they are experiencing a new life, living the different dream of a middle-aged couple.

This necessary work is done over and over again at different levels of our humanity. Doing this work in community strengthens our bonds and unites us in our common humanity. Shared grief also expands our soul and reminds us that we all suffer in some way or another. This suffering reminds us of our incomplete nature as creatures (Romans 12:15). Accepting pain, the diminishment of life and death, is the work of maturity; actively seeking to change that pain is the stuff of greatness, holiness. Hence the necessary mandate: love your enemies, your adversaries. Have you ever noticed, in the story of the Good Samaritan, that he uses bandages to bind the wounds of the robbery victim? Where did he procure these bandages from? His own clothes. The Good Samaritan literally gave his all to help this stranger, this "other." We are to give our all in this work of compassion.

The suffering we have experienced can help us appreciate the depths of another's unhappiness. This is why it is important to revisit our own past pain and reclaim these pearls of great price, so our pain can alleviate another's. What have you learned from your pain? At some level, suffering becomes the gift half understood, half received. This galls us, I know, but from the perspective of eternity, half of reality is about pain, death and suffering. The other half is about surprise, joy, and delight. Inside both elements are pearls of great wisdom. We tend to forget the insights we receive from our joyful periods, but we do remember the lessons from our pain. Is it possible that these experiences are invitations to greater depth and character for the good of others? This is the work of the hero, the saint, and all the sons of God.