

GOD'S COMPASSION AND THE PASSION OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

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"And he (Jesus) began to teach them (the disciples) that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly." Mark 8:31-32a.

"For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." I Cor. 1:17.

"When I came to you, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." I Cor. 2:1-2.

As an aide for sermon preparation and preaching during Holy Week, this study considers the meaning of God's compassion in the passion of Jesus Christ, Jesus' suffering and journey to death on the cross, and its dynamic meaning for God's compassion and passion in the lives of Christian believers today. That the cross of Christ may not be emptied of its power, we are reminded by Paul that the eloquent wisdom and lofty words of human institutions are overturned and superceded by the Crucified Christ. By this gospel, God "chose what the world considers nonsense to shame the wise," and "chose what the world despises . . . in order to destroy what the world thinks is important." (I Cor. 1:27-28; Today's English Version: Good News Bible)

I

The Journey to the Cross

In the remembering and reenactment of the events of the Passion Week, we tell and re-tell the story of Jesus' journey to the cross. This journey is a drama of the passion, *passion*, the suffering, of Christ. From Jesus' Entry into Jerusalem on Passion Sunday, and specifically from the Supper on Thursday and the night in Gethsemane, to the crucifixion outside the city gates on Friday, and Jesus' death, the events portray a drama of suffering in which "Jesus is the acting subject of a '*passion*' understood actively."¹

This drama, in its individual stages and in its totality, is a story that we must hear and retell in the active voice. We describe Christ's journey to Jerusalem as his passion, as when Luke writes, "After this time Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem." (Luke 9:51) The journey to Jerusalem and the journey to the

cross reveal God's passion in Christ, God willfully deciding and acting in human history. For Jesus, this obedience is a passionate obedience: a single-minded setting-of-the-heart, in compassion with and for all who suffer.

The journey through affliction and to death on the cross is fully symbolized as well as realized in understanding the meaning of the cross in the Roman Empire of Jesus' day. The cross is not only the instrument of most severe torture and death for the enemies of the state, it is also a weapon of fear, the most humiliating practice for moral and physical persecution in the Empire. The Cross of Christ is a stumbling block, Paul says, for people trying to understand God's activity on a cross.

For the orthodox Jew of this time, the cross represents the most serious form of public ridicule ostracism, racism, and torture at the hands of a foreign power. Any notion of God's activity in the world which is bound to the cross is certainly viewed with much suspicion and question. On the surface, the cross reveals no visible sign of God's power and respect, no security, and no blessed leader of the nation—only the upsetting event of a social outcast who is weak and defeated, bloody and dead. . . .

"For the average Greek of this time, the cross is a weapon of torture and persecution which has nothing to do with the experience of God. The cross points out the weakness and foolishness of criminals, not the truth or power of divine reality. Such a notion of the activity of God in a cross is absurd . . . the cross reveals no physical beauty, no wisdom of philosophy, and no boastful expression of might—only the bothersome event of a weak fool who suffers the consequences of upsetting the social fabric of everyday life in an occupied land.^a

That God would choose the cross as the instrument and reality through which the world's redemption might be known: how absurd! How grand and preposterous—to find God's glory in a crucifixion.

In the totality of Jesus' pain and rejection, unto death, Christian faith seeks to understand the love and compassion of God. The awareness and exploration of the *activity* of Jesus' passion, the journey of spiritual and physical pain and social degradation, contradicts any notion of *passivity* that might be ascribed to Jesus' suffering. This one whom we know as the Christ actively enters into human life, in its joy and in its pain. In the gospel, the good news of Christ crucified, God's all encompassing love is revealed: compassion, "suffering together with" (humanity), in the life and death of Jesus.

Walter Brueggeman writes that Jesus' compassion becomes the ground for criticism of the system, forces, and ideologies that produce hurt in the world. In the journey to the cross, "Jesus enters into the hurt and finally comes to embody it."

"In his compassion he embodies the anguish of those rejected by the dominant culture, and as embodied anguish he has the authority to show the deathly end of the dominant culture. Quite clearly, the one thing the dominant culture cannot tolerate or co-opt is compassion, the ability to stand in solidarity with the victims of the present order. It can manage

charity and good intentions, but has no way to resist solidarity with pain or grief. So the structures of competence and competition stand helpless before the one who groaned the groans of the hurting ones. . . . If the groans become audible, if they can be heard in the streets and markets and courts, then the consciousness of domination is already jeopardized. . . . Suffering made audible and visible produces hope, articulated grief is the gate of newness, and the history of Jesus is the history of entering into the pain and giving it voice.”⁸

Thus, Jesus’ passion embodies God’s compassion. And, in this entering into the pain, Jesus embodies that passion and agony of human emotions: anger, grief, pain and desolation. Following his entry into Jerusalem, the decisive entry of the path to the cross, Jesus enters the temple to drive out the traders and moneychangers who have made it “a den of robbers.” (Mark 11:15-19; Matthew 21:12-13) Love is expressed and communicated in disciplined anger, compassion in criticism. Righteous anger grows out of love and grief. In Luke’s account, when Jesus enters Jerusalem to the singing and praises of the company of disciples:

“Some Pharisees who were in the crowd said to him, ‘Master, reprimand your disciples.’ He answered, ‘I tell you, if my disciples keep silence the stones will shout aloud.’

“When he came in sight of the city, he wept over it and said, ‘If only you had known, on this great day the way that leads to peace! But no; it is hidden from your sight. For a time will come upon you, when your enemies will set up siege-works against you; . . . because you did not recognize God’s moment when it came.’ ” (Luke 19:39-44, The New English Bible)

The grief and righteous anger communicated in the form of lament, as we feel in the Psalms of lament, becomes the language of suffering. Jesus expresses God’s judgment and compassion in the Lament over Jerusalem:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!’ ” (Luke 13:34-35; parallel, Matthew 23:37-39)

Characterized not only by the anger and grief of moral and spiritual suffering, the passion of the cross leads Jesus to extreme physical pain and social degradation. In her book, *Suffering*, Dorothee Soëlle writes that such extreme suffering, anticipated and experienced in Gethsemane, is always characterized by the sufferer’s experience of being forsaken by God. Extreme suffering constitutes affliction, which Simone Weil analyses “in terms of its three essential dimensions: physical, psychological, and social. ‘Affliction’ involves all three.”⁹ The cross and the passion of Jesus represent the deepest affliction that our souls can imagine, that our bodies could experience.

Soëlle asks, “How can hope be expressed in the face of senseless suffer-

ing?" Encountering the cross, she says, Christian faith can make sense only by seeing that "this one whom God forsook himself becomes God."⁵ God's pain, God's anger, and God's grief are the subject and the object of the cross. Soëlle tells a story from Auschwitz, related by Elie Wiesel in his book *Night*:

"The SS hung two Jewish men and a boy before the assembled inhabitants of the camp. The men died quickly but the death struggle of the boy lasted half an hour. 'Where is God? Where is he?' a man behind me asked. As the boy, after a long time, was still in agony on the rope, I heard the man cry again, 'Where is God now?' And I heard a voice within me answer, 'Here he is—he is hanging here on this gallows. . . .'⁶

God, as victim, is on the side of the persecuted and rejected. On the cross, on the gallows, God enters into human affliction. In the paradox of faith, we believe that in this activity, God renounces the powers and instruments of human death.

II

Letting Go of Fear

In the anguish of Gethsemane, Jesus asks his disciples to sit with him as he prays. Jesus feels greatly distressed and troubled:

"He took with him Peter, James and John, and began to be horror-stricken and desperately depressed.

'My heart is breaking with a death-like grief,' he told them. 'Stay here and watch.'

Then he walked forward a little way and flung himself on the ground, praying that, if it were possible, the hour might pass him by."

(Mark 14:33-35; J.B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English*)

In the activity of suffering, entering into the pain, Jesus prays that God's will be fulfilled. The compassion of God in Christ calls upon disciples to lose their lives and to let go of all fear for self, finding security in nothing other than God's love.

". . . deny oneself and take up one's cross daily and follow me." Luke 9:23

"For it has been given to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict which you saw and now hear to be mine." Phillipians 1:29-30

The sense of dynamic activity that Christ's call represents is vibrant in the images of "letting go of fear" and "taking up" the daily cross:

Letting go of fear,
Entering into pain,
Taking up the cross
Means
Encountering our fears,

Experiencing our angers,
Claiming the fullness of
Christ's passion
God's compassion
Among Us.

Compassionate faith in our time confronts the cultures of apathy, of suppression and repression, of fear and hate abroad in the world. In speaking about apathy, Soëlle points out that the Greek word *apatheia* literally means "nonsuffering, freedom from suffering, a creature's inability to suffer":

"Apathy is a form of the inability to suffer. It is understood as a social condition in which people are so dominated by the goal of avoiding suffering that it becomes a goal to avoid human relationships and contacts altogether. In so far as the experiences of suffering, the *pathai* (Greek for things that happen to a person, misfortunes) of life are repressed, there is a corresponding disappearance of passion for life and the strength and intensity of its joys."

Compassionate faith confronts the human fears and angers that we experience in the passion of human life. To ally ourselves with God's compassion in Christ, we "let go" in order to "take up"—we acknowledge and perceive the pain in our own lives and take upon us the suffering of others. Passionate faith is an extreme compelling emotion, and an intense emotional drive (Webster's definition of "passion"). This faith involves letting go so that we may lose our lives—for the security and will of God's justice and mercy.

Consider the passion in this contemporary faith statement: "I believe that Jesus died so that no human being should ever have to die that way again." "We shouldn't have to . . .," but we do and we will die in similar and different ways if we lose our lives to take up the cross daily. The difference is that we enter human pain in behalf of God's love and justice and we seek to transform that pain into solidarity and strength, into criticism and compassion. By letting go—of personal security, of national security, of financial security? The cost is so great.

"To make the cross a present reality in our civilization means to put into practice the experience one has received of being liberated from fear for oneself; no longer to adapt oneself to this society, its idols and taboos, its imaginary enemies and fetishes; and in the name of him who was once the victim of religion, society, and the state, to enter into solidarity with the victims of religion, society, and the state at the present day, in the same way that he who was crucified became their brother and their liberator."⁸

Repression and suppression function within us, in our individual psyches and in our culture, so that we can cope with and bear the pain of human reality. We repress our fears, we suppress our anger, because we imagine that we will not be able to bear the power of these human emotions. "Idols and taboos", "imaginary enemies and fetishes" keep us safe and secure—in ourselves.

Only with God's compassion are we able to find strength and confidence *not* to adapt to society and *to* stand in solidarity with those who are victims. To see God's glory in the Cross, when we are wont to move quickly on to the power of the Resurrection, we confront the powers and instruments of death in our world. Consider how Jesus' call to "take up your cross daily" might be rendered in contemporary versions:

"Take up your firing squad and follow me."

"Take up your electric chair and follow me."

"Take up your tiger cage and follow me."

"Take up your atom bomb and follow me."⁹

In this taking up—and letting go, we perceive and identify those structures, systems and ideologies that are death-dealing. If God has already disarmed these powers and instruments of death, how long will it take us to let go of the security that we vest in them?

III

Passion and Compassion in Community

In order to nourish God's compassion and the passion of believers in Christ, we seek out a community of faith. In this place, truly wherever two or more are gathered in Jesus' name, we have the possibility of vulnerability with God and with one another. In Christian community, we are invited to face and perceive together the events and experiences that are both death-dealing and life-giving. Only when Christian community and family can provide this space, a space in which we become aware of our fear and grief and in which we are able to speak about and analyze the instruments of death, only then will we realize and embody the compassion of God. For North American Christians, community must allow us to let go of guilt that is anger turned inward and to take up the criticism of the cross. In recent years we have begun to develop this language about suffering, speaking as the church about the structures of thought and ways of living that make us benefactors, even executioners, of injustice.

To conquer the sense of powerlessness that we feel and to move out of our isolation from one another, we must involve ourselves in sharing the vulnerabilities that society would have us hide. The pulpit is the place from which we can proclaim this gospel; the challenge to the church institutionally is to create ways that this solidarity can be experienced. No single minister can provide enough pastoring to provide this space and place for members of the congregation, much less for the community in which the church finds its mission.

In communities of compassion, small groups of Christian believers, members of our congregations are called to encounter with one another:

—the stories and suffering of persons and families who live with and struggle with alcoholism, drug abuse, and other diseases which are physical and spiritual, individual and social.

—the isolation and anguish of "unemployment" or nonemployment,

wherein self-identity, meaning in life, and even one's sense of Christian vocation become threatened and eroded;

—the pain and estrangement of women and men, of couples and families, as we struggle with issues of power, of sexuality, of limited resources, in our own households;

—the pain and silent suffering of persons in our communities and families, people who are “despised and rejected” by society—be they senior citizens, people of color, disabled and handicapped persons, persons whose life-partnerships are same-sex oriented.

—the fears, behind our numbness, that we feel about nuclear weapons and a national economy based on military arms;

—the powerlessness that we feel to effect change in the distribution of world resources: food, materials, energy;

—the ways in which God's compassion can enable us to bear pain and work for the transformation of the instruments of death in our world.

All of us are freed by God's compassion in Christ. Numbness, the submission of passivity, in repressing or suppressing the world's pain, only keeps us from being sensitized to God's pain.

In the settings for Christian family and community, the church as a whole and our congregations in particular are called to be people of compassion. Not in any individualistic notions of silently bearing the misfortunes of life, we are asked to discern ways in which we can daily take up the cross together. In a community of compassion, we Christian believers experience the gifts of joy and hope in our solidarity with God and one another.

The structures for mission organized by the congregation of the Church of the Savior, in Washington, D.C., provide exciting examples of mission groups which are communities of compassion. The writings of Elizabeth O'Connor and Gordon Cosby, as well as those of Sojourners, Koinonia, and others,¹⁰ describe new structures for compassionate Christian communities in our time. Characteristics of the congregations and communities who are, if you will, passionately involved in Christian proclamation and witness, include:

—the formation of community and mission not around a building or a given denominational allegiance, but out of the identity of the people;

—the congregation organized in various small groups, specifically for mission;

—Christian education taking place in the context of mission;

—a clear requirement of commitment and concretely defined behaviors that result from this commitment;

—the opportunity to renew specific commitments in mission and to chart new directions, on a systematic, at least yearly basis; and

—a commitment to spiritual development that is rooted equally and mutually in the inward journey and the outward journey of faith.

The creation of compassionate community, through which we can respond to God's pain and joy in our humanity, is imperative for our survival as the body of Christ.

Matthew Fox, Dominican priest and theologian, seeks to retrieve the spiri-

tuality of compassion from its lonely exile, in his book *A Spirituality Named COMPASSION and the Healing of the Global Village, Humpty Dumpty and Us*. In celebrating the joy of God's "love-justice", Fox suggests that the global village is a new mandala, in the sense of a symbol and picture of the sacred and healing circle. He writes that:

. . . compassion is *not* altruistic but is a matter of the fullest self-interest. For we are all alike in our pain and we will suffer equally if the mandala self-destructs. As Paul warned: 'All of you are Christ's body, and each one is part of it. . . . If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it' (I Cor. 12.26f.). We love others *as* we love ourselves, and if we wish our own survival, then we wish others' survival and work to make it happen. This is not altruism—it is love, self-love and other-love. It is compassion, compassion toward others *and* compassion toward self and compassion toward the precarious world egg, lately named the global village."¹¹

Thus, it is in compassion, our suffering, living and loving with God's world, that we seek to embody this witness to the Christ. We are sustained by God's power and being among us—transforming the journey to the cross, enabling the activity of our own passion, and leading us into new life in community.

¹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Friedrich, Volume V, p. 916, $\pi\phi\sigma\chi\omega$ (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967).

² Mac Legerton, "The Spirit of the Cross," unpublished Masters Thesis, Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1981, pp. 10-11.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), pp. 86, 88.

⁴ Dorothee Soëlle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), pp. 85, and 13, quoting Simone Weil in *Waiting For God*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 145, quoting Elie Wiesel, *Night*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁸ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 40.

⁹ Mac Legerton, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

¹⁰ See Elizabeth O'Connor, *The New Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), and *Sojourners Magazine*, published by Sojourners, Washington, D.C.

¹¹ Matthew Fox, *A Spirituality Named Compassion and the Healing of the Global Village, Humpty Dumpty and Us* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1979), pp. 251-252.