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How to know the way, find the way, practice the way that is Jesus

Kindness is the practice of mercy. Kindness is what mercy looks like. We read in the Letter to the Ephesians, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you."ⁱ This past several months in the news we've heard of many people who have been publicly exposed and condemned. Whether or not any of us agree with these various people being ousted or outed, I would say there is an invitation for compassion. For those of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus, there is an invitation for compassion, surely not sarcasm.

The etymology of the English word "sarcasm" is from the Greek, *sarkázein*, meaning literally to strip off the flesh. People who are exposed have already been stripped. They don't need our help with that. Nor do they need more judgment. They have enough of that, also, and mostly from within their own souls. They need to be re-clothed with compassion – I'm using here language from the Letter to the Colossians. They need to be re-clothed with "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience... and above all, love."ⁱⁱ They need to find their belongings, where they now belong. They need to be shrouded with compassion, which means that we, their witnesses, be willing to suffer with them. We suffer with these people – all the people who show up poorly on our poor list – because we could so easily be they. We are all so similar, I would say. People simply do not wake up some morning and say to themselves, "How can I screw up my life?" "How can I make things really, really bad for me and for my family and my colleagues?" Life isn't like that. Bad things happen to bad people and good people alike; and even good people are prone to make some very bad decisions. All of this can have terrible, sometimes inescapable repercussions, like a tsunami of the soul that a person has started but cannot stop. The theology which Jesus confronted in his own day can still surface in our own day: that people get what they deserve. I hope not. I certainly hope not for myself.

Jesus was compassionate. A sense of compassion seems continually to have informed his life and ministry. It is the clearest and prevailing reason why Jesus did what he did and said what he said: because of his compassion for others. Compassion is not just observing suffering, but actually entering the suffering of another. Again and again we read in the gospels how Jesus had tender loving mercy for the crowds and he healed their sick.ⁱⁱⁱ He was moved with compassion because they were distressed and dejected like sheep without a shepherd.^{iv} He had compassion for those with incurable diseases,^v for the blind,^{vi} for those who had nothing to eat,^{vii} and for widows.^{viii} Compassion informs what he does. Over and over again Jesus says to people, "Don't cry," "Don't worry," "Don't be afraid."^{ix} What made the good Samaritan in the parable *good* was the compassion he felt for the man left half dead on the roadside and the Samaritan's kindness to help.^x There's the story of the prodigal son and his father, which is a story about compassion.^{xi} Again and again we hear that what moved Jesus to work and to weep, to help and to heal, was compassion. And this ultimately gets Jesus into terrible trouble because it challenged the "purity system" that controlled his culture.^{xii} Purity and holiness were

inextricably connected. The Jewish Law said, “You shall be pure as God is pure.” This purity system, taken to an extreme, kept everyone and everything locked in place: what was clean and what was unclean; what could be touched and not touched; to whom one could speak and not speak; when help could be given and when it could not.

This interlocking purity system in Jesus’ day had several rules. One rule had to do with your birth. There was a kind of pecking order, from the best people to the worst people. The best people were the priests and Levites, and then came the other Jews, and then came those who were Jewish converts, and then people who were not Jewish, and then people who were physically or mentally ill, and then people who were imprisoned or very poor. The rules: men were the best, women the worst, or at least they were second class. Bearing children and the monthly menstrual period always made a woman impure. Certain occupations made you impure, like being a tax collector or a shepherd.^{xiii} It was tragic (but not accidental) that what made a person impure often kept them impure: women could not cease to be women; a poor person did not have money to see a doctor or eat healthy food, and so they stayed sick (which means impure). Likewise a poor person could not afford a pure animal or bird to bring to the temple to make sacrifice and therefore become “worthy.” And so they were stuck being an outcast. “Bad things happen to bad people,” was a prevailing sentiment.

Jesus breaks the legalistic rules that kept people locked in their places. For Jesus, the most important “rule” was the justice and love of God.^{xiv} “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”^{xv} Jesus spends time with “impure” women, and even allows himself to be touched by them. He enters graveyards “defiled” by mentally-ill people, i.e., demon-possessed people. He eats with anyone who will share their food – most *any* kind of drink and food – and for that reason he is called a drunkard and glutton. He didn’t just talk about forgiveness; he was forgiving... and so he had a reputation of being “a friend of sinners,” because he was always with the wrong kind of people. Because of this, Jesus faced a “character assassination.” Jesus said to everyone: come on, come follow me, every single one of you: “Follow my words, follow my way.” Jesus turned the tables upside down and said that compassion, not this legalistic “purity code,” is the most important thing. Compassion as the essence of holiness, not purity.

I would say this presents us with an enormous invitation and an enormous challenge. Many of us, I can imagine, may have internalized certain “purity codes” about who’s in and who’s out. Probably most of us are more naturally drawn to those whom we perceive to be most like us: those who think like us, behave like us, believe like us, look like us. And some days we might be tempted to think that God is much the same (which could be like creating God in our own image). Jesus looks with pity and compassion on everyone, saying that there’s room within his wide arms and broken heart for everyone... including even those whom we ourselves might be tempted some days to think don’t belong, and those who have “fallen from grace.” There’s no such thing as falling from grace. We are always caught up in God’s grace. That’s the point. Everyone is a child of God. Even the people we may find to be poor (say, poor examples of anything we find good), even someone whom we may find to be pathetic, or presumptuous, or misguided, or disgusting, even those who reject us, even *these* people have a place at the table as children of God.

If you're in touch with some sarcasm or cynicism in your own soul toward some person – maybe a mighty person who has fallen, or someone who is like an urchin in your eyes – if you find yourself teeming with recreational delight because of the well-deserved suffering of someone in the news, then pray for them. Even if they represent everything you find abhorrent – as if they were your enemy – pray for them. Pray for them long enough until you can see how much you are like them. You really are. Pray for them until you can understand what must be their suffering, which is your compassion. Someone who has a way of getting under your skin probably belongs there. If you suffer because of someone, you are *almost* already compassionate for them. Compassion is suffering *with* someone. Pray for this person long enough until you are ready to receive them if they were to come knocking at your door, exposed and desperate, asking for your help. We bear Jesus Christ to this world. The clearest and prevailing reason why Jesus did what he did and said what he said was because of his compassion for others, his tender loving mercy. Pray for the people whom you could be glad you are not like. Pray for them until you are ready to receive them knocking at the door of your heart. Judge them by the standards God will hold up for you. Judge them in need of God's love, as much as you. St. John of the Cross, the 16th century Spanish mystic, says, “at the end of our life, we will be judged by love.”^{xvi}

We read in the Talmud, “Deeds of kindness are equal in weight to all the commandments.” Saint Paul writes, “as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.”^{xvii}

ⁱ Ephesians 4:32.

ⁱⁱ Colossians 3:12-14 “As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 14:14.

^{iv} Matthew 9:36, compare Mark 6:34.

^v Mark 1:41.

^{vi} Matthew 20:34.

^{vii} Mark 5:42-43; Mark 8:2f.

^{viii} Mark 12:41-44; Luke 7:13.

^{ix} See Mark 5:36; 6:50; Matthew 6:25-34; Mark 4:40; Luke 10:41.

^x Luke 10:33.

^{xi} Luke 15:20.

^{xii} A number of examples drawn from *Jesus Before Christianity*, by Albert Nolan. (Orbis Books); p. 43.

^{xiii} Insight about “pecking order,” purity codes, and compassion drawn from *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, by Marcus J. Borg. (Harper Collins); pp. 50-55ff.

^{xiv} See Luke 11:42 and Matthew 23:23.

^{xv} Micah 6:8.

^{xvi} St. John of the Cross (1542-1591), a Spanish mystic and the Founder (with St. Teresa) of the Discalced Carmelites.

^{xvii} Colossians 3:12.