

Feb. 28, 2016  
Colossians 3:12-17  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
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## ***Compassion and Forgiveness***

### INTRO to SCRIPTURE

This afternoon the Adult Choir will be sharing, *The Shoemaker*, a one-act opera by Stephen Paulus. This piece is based on a short story, *What Men Live By*, written by Leo Tolstoy.

In the story we are reminded that

- sometimes we entertain angels unaware
- life is what happens when we are making other plans
- compassion changes everything

The story begins with a naked man huddled and shivering in the winter cold by the side of the road. He obviously needs a coat but it turns out that he is also in need of a garment of love, which made me think of the reading from Colossians that I have selected for today.

### SERMON

Many years ago, Ron and I were in a serious car accident. I am mindful of the large number of people who helped us. The people who stopped, the EMTs, the doctors, nurses and technicians, the tow truck operator, the insurance agent, the hotel staff and friends who helped with pets and children. That's just a partial list. It takes a community to offer support in difficult times. That theme is poignantly woven into Tolstoy's story in a

number of different encounters. Each time, compassion changes everything.

As I've been spending time with Tolstoy's story I'm struck by an underlying assumption that I think actually puts Tolstoy, and us, in a bind. It has to do with his theme of compassion. It has to do with one of the central characters, who - spoiler alert - is an angel. Yet, the people around him don't realize he is an angel. He's among the humans, Tolstoy writes, as a punishment from God because he didn't do as he was told.

The reason the angel didn't do as he was told was, ironically, because he had compassion on another character in the story. Here is where it gets convoluted. You see, learning about acting in compassion is the point of the story. The angel who disobeyed by acting in compassion is sent to earth to learn about compassion.

Tolstoy seems to accept this self-imposed double bind without critique. At first read we too are likely to accept it without question. However, let's stop to think about what image of God Tolstoy assumes. God ...

- gives orders
- delivers punishment when not obeyed
- requires a trial, a test
- then forgives when the lesson is learned.

In this world view God is primarily the rule giver and we, and angels apparently, are the rule obeyers. God is the Judge. Indeed that was a prominent metaphoric perception of God in Tolstoy's day and continues to be for many people today.

I can't tell you how many times someone, who has had something bad happen in their life, has said to me, "I don't know why God is punishing me. I've always tried to live a good life." People may not consciously think of God as judge, but in their feeling life it feels like they are being punished.

Why is it that we are so quick to see hardship or tragedy as punishment from God? Maybe it's harder to accept the messiness of real life than it is to deal with a judgmental God. Maybe we would rather have a God who acts like a marionette operator - an all powerful, all knowing, all controlling deity - than have to grapple with the creative, yet chaotic, character of life in which God's promise is simply to be with us whatever happens.

The confirmation class today is considering the Christmas stories. At the heart of the Christmas message is Emmanuel, "God with us," sharing our common lot with all its pain and suffering as well as all its joy and delight.

In this season of Lent, we find ourselves moving from the celebration of Christmas to the turmoil of Holy Week. We are reminded that on his journey, Jesus of Nazareth fully engaged the pathos as well as the pageantry of life. That of course is what brought him to the cross.

One could ask "Was the cross God's punishment of Jesus?" I think most people would say no. However many people still see God as Judge and connect the cross to holy punishment. We are very familiar with people saying that the cross is God's punishment for human sins, a punishment which Jesus accepted on our behalf. The classic phrase is - Jesus died *for* our sins. According to this line of thinking somebody has to pay the price.

This perspective has deep connection to the Jewish practice of Jesus' day in which animal sacrifice was a way of glorifying and appeasing God. For those early Jewish followers of Jesus it made sense to connect him to the image of a sacrificial lamb, which was so central to their temple experience. It is from this heritage that the language of sacrifice becomes part of the biblical witness about Jesus. (However, it is important to note that in the later half of the 1st century the Jewish community stopped practicing animal sacrifice.)

There is a connection between sin and the cross. However, rather than saying Jesus died *for* our sins, we might say that Jesus died *because* of our sin. The brokenness of human community impacts everyone. We are in this together. Jesus was so "in this with us" that he could not avoid the agony of human brokenness. God was with Jesus on the cross. With Jesus, God bears the brokenness of the world. We are called to bear with one another in the brokenness of the world. To bear one another's burdens. To have compassion. To practice forgiveness in the face of brokenness.

Forgiveness is one of the most challenging spiritual practices. It involves both feelings and commitments. When we need to forgive someone else, or ourselves, or God, of something that doesn't evoke strong feelings in us, it is usually easier. It is when we are deeply moved, deeply pained, deeply shamed that forgiveness is a more challenging process.

That's because there are consequences of brokenness. It hurts and usually takes time to heal. These consequences are not necessarily punishments, but they are real consequences of violation and violence. It can take a long time to deal with the feelings that come in the midst of such brokenness.

However, there is also a component of forgiveness that is not about feelings but about a spiritual commitment to stay focused on God with us, to be focused on grace and the possibilities of a new future, remembering that Easter is God's promise that new life is possible.

Forgiveness:

- It does not mean forgetting.
- It does not mean revenge.
- It also does not mean allowing yourself to be misused or abused.
- It does not necessarily mean staying in contact with the other person(s)
  
- It does mean truth telling.
- It does mean acknowledging the pain.
- It does mean not continuing to beat up on yourself or someone else or God
- It does mean not being bound to the pain of the past.
- It does mean being open to a different future.

There is no prescribed time line for forgiveness. However, many of us are stunned when we watch certain people move quickly to words of forgiveness in the face of horrendous tragedy, such as with some of the families of the church members who were murdered in Charleston last year. Most likely these were people who have been engaging in the spiritual practice of forgiveness for a long time.

It does not mean they are not angry. It does not mean they are not deeply grieved. It does not mean that their pain will not stay with them for a long time. It means they refuse to allow what has happened to define their lives or the lives of their loved ones who died. They are making a spiritual commitment to move forward into a future that is still open. They are making a spiritual commitment to do it together. Most often when we see this kind of powerful spiritual witness it comes from a community of people. They are with one another and trusting that God is with them, because no one can make it alone. It takes a community to offer support in difficult times, even for an angel.