

JUSTICE AND COMPASSION – IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF OUR SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION

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Today, many people are asking about the meaning and importance of compassion in our lives. Recently, I was invited to share with an interfaith group on the subject of compassion. It is very timely because most major religions of the world all speak about the divine, about God as a God of compassion and they stress the need to live and practice compassion in our daily lives. It is a virtue that is badly needed in today's world that values competition and power and greed over compassion. In the Gospels, Jesus said: "Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate."

How do I understand compassion? Literally it means to suffer with, to be with people when and where they suffer and to willingly enter into their struggle, weakness and pain, to let it get inside of us and compel us to make a compassionate response. One example comes to mind that worked in our area. It started three decades ago when we had very high unemployment in Racine. Families of the unemployed came together monthly and shared their pain. Often at meetings, parents would be weeping because their children who were ill could not get needed care. After one of the meetings, a few of us got together and agreed that this situation could not go on. We convened a group of local people and explored the possibility of making something happen. We got an amazing response. The hospital offered their services, a local church offered space, some health care providers offered free health care and the State of Wisconsin agreed to provide liability coverage for those who would serve in the free clinic. Thirty years later, 350 volunteer providers serve in the clinic known as the Health Care Network which is still booming. In one year, over 10,000 appointments were provided for medical and dental care. It has been a blessing to many over the years. Thanks to the original group that allowed the pain to enter their hearts and they called forth a compassionate response.

WHAT ARE THE ELEMENTS OF COMPASSION?

- a. It is a call to enter into the pain and suffering of those in need, to be with them in their cry for help and to enable them to articulate what would be helpful to them.
- b. Enter deeply within ourselves and get in touch with the God of compassion who is the one who will work through us as we respond to the needs of those around us. Then we become participants and

sharers in God's compassion. Thus, we get in touch with our own vulnerability as we touch the pain of others in a compassionate and caring way.

- c. It starts among ourselves, showing compassion to the sick, the lonely, the helpless, and those needing encouragement.

Compassion is more than pity or an occasional handout to someone in need. Compassion is a great equalizer. Nothing we can do is too small to make a difference. It is a life journey. We find out how we are all connected and in need of compassionate care at times.

Beyond addressing the direct aid, we need to look at long-term solutions. What are the causes of this problem and pain? Where is it coming from? What can we do to change the unjust system and structure that may be causing the problem in the first place. We can help the victims of injustice to stand tall, with courage and hope. In our global village we are faced every day with countless needs that cry out to be addressed. We can choose and join with some other group in our response. In this way, we bring the need for justice into our solutions.

The call to compassion is like the voice of God calling us: "I have no hands or heart but yours to show compassion to those most in need." How will I/we respond? We can invite our churches or organizations to respond in some meaningful way. None of us can fully reach our destination while others are left out. We need each other for growth and change. Each one of us is called to be compassionate as our God is compassionate. Let us give some deep thought to this call and respond with courage and hope.