

Being Compassionate . . . to Ourselves

Luke 10:25-28

Sermon by Dan Schrock

January 24, 2021

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”²⁶He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”²⁷He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”²⁸And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

I

When it comes to acting with compassion, we Mennonites are outstanding. Imitating the example of Jesus’ own compassion, we founded Mennonite Central Committee in the 1920s in order to alleviate the suffering of others. It was compassion that motivated us to go overseas in the PAX program of the mid-20th century, that caused us to set up voluntary service programs so we could help others, and that leads to provide temporary housing for homeless families through Interfaith Hospitality Network. The impulse toward compassion has inspired us to become nurses and doctors, teachers and social workers, therapists and mediators. We are wonderful at helping people on the margins with food, housing, medical care, education, comfort, and peace. We Mennonites have done outstanding work in offering compassion to people outside the church.

However, when it comes to offering compassion to ourselves, we are not so outstanding. Once I attended a day-long workshop led by a Mennonite therapist and pastor. His specialty was working with various kinds of addicts—mostly other Mennonites who were addicted to legal or illegal substances, whether to sugar or pornography, to cocaine or tobacco, to alcohol or overeating. He was a dynamic speaker in the sense that no one in the workshop went to sleep; and he certainly gave us many valuable insights about the dynamics of addiction. But he never talked about compassion, either his own compassion for his clients, or his clients’ compassion for themselves. His underlying message was that addicts should pray harder and work harder to overcome their addiction. The key to overcoming addiction, he said, was sweaty striving.

Wanting to give this Mennonite therapist and pastor another chance, I went to a second workshop about a year later where he was again the featured speaker. This second time, I hoped to hear words of compassion. But instead of compassion, we heard high moral indignation. I left disappointed.

That workshop leader was hard on addicts, but he was simply doing what most of us already do to ourselves. We Mennonites tend to believe God wants us to orient our whole lives to other people and ignore ourselves. Consider some statements Mennonites have been known to make.

- “I’m so full of myself, I’m definitely a terrible Christian.”
- “I feel bad about myself because I should be more kind.”
- “I’m so awful at doing what God wants me to do.”
- “I should have worked harder and done more for those poor people.”
- “My children did not turn out the way I hoped, and I feel like a failure.”

A lack of compassion for ourselves sometimes extends to daily life.

- “I look like a beached whale in this dress.”
- “I’m the worst with computers.”
- “I’m terrible with directions.”
- “Ugh! Just look at those disgusting wrinkles on my face and all those grey hairs on my head!”

If you want, you can call it the habit of floccinaucinihilipilification—and yes, that’s a real word, one of the longest in the English language.

Floccinaucinihilipilification is the habit of thinking that something or someone is worthless. In this case, we Mennonites can be very good at floccinaucinihilipilification with ourselves.

II

Back in first century Palestine, lawyers loved playing around with Jesus, just to see how he’d respond to baffling problems. One day a particular lawyer tested Jesus with what he thought was a thorny question: what do I have to do in order to live in God’s

eternity? As Jesus did so often, he responded with another question. Well, what do you think? What does Jewish scripture say? The lawyer's answer, alluding to Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, is this: God wants me to love God with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my strength, and with all my mind; and to love my neighbor as myself."

The lawyer's response, which Jesus grades with an A+, has three clear steps. First, love begins in our relationship with God. Second, we love ourselves. And third, we love other people. Andrew Dreitcer, a Christian scholar who specializes in compassion, says compassion works the same way, since compassion is one way of expressing love.¹ Dreitcer says that if we really want to be compassionate people, then the first step is to ground ourselves in the compassion of God. God is the original source of compassion in the universe, a living fountain that pours out compassion for us and for all of creation. To live as compassionate people, our first step is to soak up the compassion that flows from God.

Our second step is to offer compassion to ourselves. This is the step I missed in the workshops led by that Mennonite therapist and pastor. It's the step so many of us Mennonites miss. Instead of offering compassion to ourselves, we dish out to ourselves judgment and harsh criticism. A stern voice inside us says: "I am not good enough for God; I am not obedient enough to God; I am a failure as a follower of Jesus." Most of us give that stern voice a lot of air time. But there is another option, the option which both the lawyer and Jesus hint at in Luke 10. We can offer tender compassion to the parts of us that we think do not meet our own high standards.

The third step in becoming compassionate people, says Dreitcer, is to offer compassion for others. Real compassion for others happens only after we first embrace God's compassion and then extend compassion to ourselves. If he is right about this, then many of us have missed that crucial second step. It makes you wonder how much more robust our compassionate acts of service might become if we added that crucial second step.

¹ Andrew Dreitcer, *Living Compassion: Loving Like Jesus* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2017).

III

How could we become more compassionate Christians? I'd like to pass along two suggestions from Andrew Dreitcer. The first step, as we've said, is to anchor ourselves in God's compassion for each of us. Many of you already know about the Jesus Prayer, an ancient prayer practice from earlier in church history that goes, "Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me." Dreitcer suggests changing the words to something like this: "Jesus, Son of God, have compassion on me." That's a prayer you can take with you and repeat occasionally throughout the day, over the course of many weeks or months. "Jesus, Son of God, have compassion on me." In time, this prayer can expand our inner reserves of compassion.²

The second step, of course, is to extend God's compassion to the various parts of ourselves that are not what we wish they were. Dreitcer suggests using the FLAG process. FLAG is an acronym for the words *fear*, *longing*, *ache*, and *gift*. You use the FLAG process with these questions.

- What fear do I have?
- What longing do I have that is not fulfilled?
- What ache in me is not healed?
- What gift in me has not flourished which might bless other people?³

Once you've identified your fear, longing, ache, or gift, then you can extend some of God's compassion to that part of yourself. Or if you prefer, you can imagine Jesus offering compassion to that part of yourself. You can also notice how Jesus' compassion affects your body. What does compassion do to your forehead? To your neck? Your shoulders? Your chest? Your back? Some other location in your body?

IV

For decades, the motto at Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship has been "to live Christ's loving, caring, healing presence." People at Berkey have usually understood this

² Dreitcer, 79-82. He actually suggests the Jesus Prayer for step two, being compassionate toward ourselves, but I think it also works well for the first step, grounding ourselves in God's compassion.

³ Dreitcer, 116-121.

excellent motto to mean that we want to express Christ's loving, caring, healing presence to other people. After being in this congregation for eighteen and three-fourth years, I can say with conviction that you all are quite good at doing just that.

Nevertheless today, in my 466th and final sermon as one of the pastors of this congregation, I hope you will also give more of God's boundless compassion to yourselves. Let Christ's tender-hearted compassion settle inside yourself so that you become compassion from the inside out. Doing that, says Jesus, will give you eternal life.