

August 15, 2010
First Church of Squantum
Rev. Dr. Emmy Robertson

A Commitment to Compassion

Our scripture reading this morning is from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has gathered his disciples to him and is walking with them throughout Galilee teaching and healing. Matthew gives us a wonderful narrative of Jesus' impact on those he encounters. Crowds gather around him. People are eager to hear what he has to say. Jesus sets out a better way to live than the crowds currently know. Jesus teaches kindness, compassion, caring for others. Jesus manifests a lack of selfishness that remains compelling to this very day, two thousand years later.

In Verse 12, "In everything, do for others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." Here is the Golden Rule. This calls for activity on behalf of others. The Golden Rule, or a variation of it, is found in every major religion of the world. In the first century before Christ's time Rabbi Hillel has been recorded as saying, 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah...go and learn it.' Jesus takes this wisdom and activates it. He puts the emphasis on the listener's behavior. 'In everything do for others as you would have them do to you...'

How well have we all learned this over the two thousand years of Christian life that we and our Christian ancestors have known of it? Isn't it strange that we still gossip, still enjoy retaliating for slights that may or may not have happened to us? Our selfish, self centered human nature still takes precedence all too often over the wisdom of Jesus' teaching.

You have often heard me talk about how the Pilgrims did not like repetitive prayer or responses in their worship services. They felt that the rote recitation of The Lord's Prayer, the doxology and the Gloria Patrie that we include every week in our Order of Service became meaningless with the familiarity of recitation. And, yet, when I have mentioned that perhaps we could omit them, there is an outcry that to do so would be to remove a level of comfort and familiarity that our congregation desires in it's weekly worship.

Consider for a moment what our worship service would be like if everything in it were repetition: the prayers, the music, the responses, the sermon. Hmmm, it begins to sound like the Roman Catholic mass, doesn't it? The repetitiveness of the worship service is a pet interest of mine, and last time I was with my Episcopal priest friend, Susan Langle, and was spouting off on this subject, she countered that she could see that the whole subject was a simple rebelliousness against the English church on the part of the dissenters, or pilgrims. That brought me up short. There is real truth in what Susan said, but since being a rebel is so deeply a part of my personality, it would stand to reason that I would be interested in this subject.

There is merit on both sides of the issue of repetition in the order of worship. With familiarity we can stop thinking about our response and just go with the known and tried and true. With new information and words we have to pay more attention and think, something many of us do not want to be bothered with as regards the hour of worship on Sundays.

But, again, knowing how long the Golden Rule has been around, and then how well each of us is actually able to put it into practice in our lives, it is clear that repetitiveness dulls the senses and the need to change our behavior.

And that leads me to Karen Armstrong's Charter for Compassion. Sometimes we need to be able to hear the wisdom of Christianity with new ears and with freshness. "Armstrong argues that religion is not about intellectual assent. It is valuable because it is 'life enhancing.' You will not discover [religions'] truth," she writes, "unless you apply these myths and doctrines to your own life and put them into practice."¹

Let me tell you briefly about Karen Armstrong. She is a woman who has overcome tremendous personal adversity in her life. When I read her autobiography, *The Spiral Staircase*, I wept at the difficulties that life laid before her, a life in the convent as a nun and the anorexia that resulted from it, her studies at Oxford that failed to yield a doctorate for her, her discovery of her epilepsy which she characterized as wonderful because she then could know that she had a treatable illness instead of madness. When I read about all of this I was put in mind of one of my favorite quotes said by Neitche, "that which does not kill me, strengthens me." Throughout it all, she carried on and began to study comparative religion. Karen Armstrong has written 19 books on world religion, of which I have a few. I learned about her writings in seminary, and Mike and I were privileged to here her speak on Islam and Christianity a few years ago. I believe that Clara has more recently heard her speak at Harvard.

For her outstanding work in 2008 Karen Armstrong was awarded the TED prize, ("Technology, Entertainment and Design") which is given by a silicon valley entrepreneur each year to provide the recipient the means to execute 'one wish to change the world.' Karen Armstrong used her prize to launch a web site called Charter for Compassion. "People go to the site and sign a statement declaring that compassion 'lies at the heart of all religions, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat others as we wish to be treated ourselves.' The statement declares illegitimate² all 'interpretation of scripture' that leads to violence, hatred or distain. The statement has been signed by Desmond Tutu, Melissa Etheridge, the Dali Lama, the founder of ebay, and close to 40,000 other people." Including your ministers, Mike and Emmy Robertson.

The web site is printed in this mornings' bulletin. I urge those of you who have access to a computer to go to the web site this week and read about the Charter for Compassion, and if you agree with what it contains, then you can sign it as Mike and I have. I have put a print-out of the Charter on the bulletin board in the Narthex for everyone to read. This

¹ Frykholm, Amy, Tracking God, *Christian Century*, June 29, 2010, p.22.

² Ibid., p 23.

is what it says: “The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical, and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and put another there, and to honor the inviolable sanctity of every human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity, and respect.

‘It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others-even our enemies- is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

‘We therefore call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the center of morality and religion- to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or distain is illegitimate- to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures- to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity- to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings- even those regarded as enemies.

‘We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.’³

I well understand that this is a lot to take in. It really needs to be studied, savored and thought about, so take your time, think about it, and let me know what your thoughts are concerning the Charter.

The article in Christian Century that I have quoted from in this sermon was basically a negative one about Karen Armstrong and her ravishing Charter for Compassion. This surprised me as I was reading the article until I reflected on it and realized that the mainstream religious world is similar to academia. Scholarly work is good, but making the New York Times Best Seller List with your book is bad form. And, why would that be, exactly? Well, it is a further demonstration of not practicing the Golden Rule and being jealous of another’s success. Karen Armstrong overcame her afflictions and religious doubts through the study of world religions. She has done original work in the formulating and bringing together of similar threads in all religious traditions. She has earned her living by doing this. She is free from the constraints of academia and religious dogma. She is a free thinker. Oh, boy! That will cause a lot of nay saying in the establishment!

³ <http://charterforcompassion.org/>

A few years ago, I made this rug, and I have not had its questions answered. “And why all the war and destruction when the Prince of Peace came over 2000 years ago and brought us love? Does anybody care?” That has dismayed me since I am usually in the company of Christians. A friend of mine recently saw this rug for the first time and was dismayed that it wasn’t hanging in a church. Well, actually, I am dismayed, too, but no church has ever asked for it, so it continues to reside in the closet. For me, I can find the answer to my questions in Karen Armstrong’s Charter. This charter makes sense to me, and I am going to give it much thought and study in the days and weeks to come. The answer is in what we have learned as the Golden Rule. Its an easy concept, but very hard to practice.

I’ll close this sermon with a couple of letters to the editor from *The Christian Century*. The first one is: “...As someone who teaches ethics and philosophy at a community college, I have found that my students learn to explore spirituality by understanding the common roots of compassion. The poet Edwin Markham once remarked that while the Golden Rule is often professed by religions, it is seldom practiced. I would rather align myself with those who search for what unites us at a practical level than those who seek doctrinal purity and divisions.”⁴ John Morgan, Reading, PA

“Fryholm [the author of the article on Karen Armstrong] characterizes the Charter for Compassion as a Web site, but it is far more. For those who are unaware of its reach, the charter’s aim is to create a dynamic process that builds civil discourse and inspires community-based, cooperative action. Some pertinent facts about the Charter for Compassion include the following: Over 150,000 people from 180 countries contributed to the creation of the charter. In response to the charter, the city of Seattle has declared itself a ‘compassionate city’ with a ten year plan involving many aspects of the community. In July, the 2010 Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly affirmed the Charter for Compassion and is sending it to all its congregations throughout the country.”⁵ Mark Greiner, Takoma Park, MD

What could we do with this charter right here at First Church? Would we like to create an event? Would we like to hold an event in the Peace Park that was created here in Squantum last year? I urge you to look at this web site and see all of the events that have taken place with the idea of putting compassion at the center of our lives. As of yesterday the site had recorded 952 events from all over the world. Friends, we live in a global world, let’s think globally, but act locally. Let’s become a part of the Charter for Compassion.

May it be so!

⁴ *The Christian Century*, August 10, 2010, p. 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*