

Proper 7B: 1 Samuel 17.57-18.5, 10-16

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The spring before we moved to Memphis, Ardelle and I took part in a compassion cultivation course. This is not a gentler name for one of the court-ordered anger management classes she used to teach, by the way. We were voluntary participants.

It was led by our friend Dent Gitchel, a psychology professor who got interested in the intersection of modern neuroscience and mindfulness practice. MRIs and PET scans are increasingly confirming what religious mystics and contemplatives have known for centuries, which is that whether or not prayer changes the mind of God, certain forms of it can change our minds, and very much for the better.

Compassion, by the way, is not pity. Compassion is the human capacity to respond to suffering, in ourselves and in others, with understanding, patience, and kindness, rather than fear, anger, and repulsion. It's something inherent to all humans. It is also something that can be strengthened, like a muscle, with the right kind of practice.

The topic for week six in our course was "Broadening Compassion." Early this past Thursday morning, I found the guided meditation we used and pulled it up on my phone. The warm voice of Stanford professor Thupten Jimpa welcomed me, asked me to turn my attention to my breath for a few minutes, and then told me to bring to mind something that is causing me stress, pain, or suffering right now. He encouraged me to notice how I feel when I think about it. From that uncomfortable place, he invited me to remember that I, like all human beings, have a basic aspiration for happiness, connection, and meaning, and to be free from suffering. Then he asked me to repeat silently to myself, "May I be free from suffering. May I find peace and joy."

The practice moves outward from here. Next you bring to mind someone dear to you, a close friend or loved one. You remember a time when they were in pain or in trouble. And then repeat to them in your mind, "May you be free from suffering. May you know peace and joy."

After that it's someone you don't know so well. Someone you might recognize from the grocery store or coffee shop. Like you, Thupten Jimpa says, they have also had ups and downs. They too want to be loved and appreciated. To this remembered stranger, now, you say, "May you be free from suffering. May you know peace and joy."

But then you must do the same thing with someone who is causing you pain or anxiety or grief right now. They have also had ups and downs in their life, you're reminded. They too want to be loved, appreciated, free from pain. To this nearby enemy you say silently, "May you be free from suffering. May you know peace and joy."

Then it's all people in your neighborhood, everyone in Memphis, every citizen of Tennessee. Yes, all of them. All of these people are human. Which means they have had ups and downs. They want to be loved and appreciated. To all of them, and ultimately to all inhabitants of earth, you repeat in your mind, "May you be free from suffering. May you know peace and joy."

Now, I'm guessing some of you would rather undergo a dental procedure without the benefit of anesthesia than endure 20 minutes of a practice like this one. Once upon a time, I would have. And I'm guessing some of you might be wondering if there's anything particularly Christian about it. But even if there may be good reasons for someone to tell you that love is a decision, not a feeling, this particular Christian increasingly believes God wants to transform how we feel in our minds and bodies about the world. Jesus could have told us to be fair to our enemies, but he told us to love them. Learning to wish an enemy to be free from suffering and that they know joy and peace sounds a lot more like Christian love to me than whatever it is we mean by the non-feeling decision we call love while our hearts keep stewing in bitterness. Likewise, when Paul told the Corinthians just now, "Our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections..." do you really think he was talking about something other than deeply felt emotion?

Well, it's not actually any of our New Testament readings for today that I want us to dig into more deeply. It's that story about David and Jonathan and Saul from 1st Samuel. And the question I'd like to explore is whether a biblical text can help expand the boundaries of our compassion. Can God use a story like this one to "make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else," as Paul put it in another epistle?

It would be difficult for the story to state the love between David and Jonathan more beautifully or more intensely. "The soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul," we're told. This is not a description of some dispassionate agreement between two acquaintances. Nor is it foolish for some scholars to wonder whether David and Jonathan were actually in love. I don't think it's certain. Friendship can be deeply felt between two people without romantic attraction. But their relationship was nothing if not deeply felt, wouldn't you agree?

Something has gone sideways, however, in the relationship between David and Jonathan's father, King Saul. On one level this is a story about how human violence can result from unchecked emotions like fear, and jealousy, and insecurity, which can mix together into a dangerous form of anger, as they did in Saul that day when he tried to pin the soulmate of his son to the wall with a spear.

This is a truth about all of us, and a truth I think the story seeks to tell. But I skipped over a problematic line, as we preachers are so wont to do. The text says clearly that the whole horrible scene resulted, not because the king was in a funk, but when an evil spirit from God rushed upon him. Did you notice that? Did it not give you pause? "An

evil spirit from God.” Could there be a more problematic phrase in the whole problematic collection of problematic books we call the Bible?

Well here’s my question. What if the expansion of our compassion is so important to God that God would rather take the blame for our enemy’s anger than let our anger get the final say in who we believe our enemy to be?

Recently, I was listening to an interview with the novelist Marilynne Robinson about her book, *Reading Genesis*. Well into the conversation, the interviewer, Ezra Klein, said he had a question about the book of Exodus. He said he’s always loved the story of the Exodus and that there may be no story in the Torah that’s done more good, inspired more hope among oppressed people than this one. But there’s a moment in it he finds to be among the most troubling in all of the Torah. It’s when we’re told, over and over again, that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart.

What Marilynne Robinson said in reply is, “Well, it’s a curious thing ... But I will say that in that odd way that things work in scripture, Pharaoh is actually exonerated by the fact that God does not give that decision to him. It is God that hardens Pharaoh’s heart. It’s not Pharaoh that hardens Pharaoh’s heart. And that is simply another instance of that very surprising tendency scripture always has, to obscure blame, to deflect condemnation in a certain sense.”

It’s an astonishing insight. The archetypal enemy of the Hebrew people can’t be blamed outright, which means he can’t be hated outright with the pure hatred we reserve for the unreservedly evil. Put another way, compassion is broadened toward the awfullest character in the story when God takes the rap for his hardened heart. It’s as if the God of scripture would rather complicate God’s own reputation than let our understanding of an enemy be without complication. Pharaoh was human, you see. Which means Pharaoh too had ups and downs. Pharaoh too wanted to be loved and appreciated. To be free from suffering. To know joy and peace...

And so it was with Saul. An evil spirit from God rushed upon him one day and he tried to kill his son’s best friend. With that line, blame is once again obscured. Saul is not entirely in control of Saul’s actions. More than that, can you imagine a love so strong, so divine even, that it is willing to be misunderstood or even found guilty of some petty king’s sin, if it means that your love, if it means that my compassion, might expand toward someone we’d rather just outright hate?

These are the scriptures, you know, of a rabbi named Jesus. These are the texts that shaped him. The stories, not that he set aside or rejected as primitive and cruel. But stories he showed us how to dig into more deeply for the disruptive truths they still bear.

Is it really so strange, then, that a God willing to be blamed for the evil of a jealous king might enter our lives also as a teacher who told us to bless those who curse us and to love those who hate us. One who ended up looking for all the world like a criminal when he died, in part because he seemed to care nothing about defending his

own reputation or identity. He emptied himself, as Philippians says, because self preservation has never been Love's way. He didn't care what we thought of him. All he cared about was that our lives be fired ever more fully by the love that fired his, as it did the lives of young Jonathan and David before him. All he cared about is that we feel such love with the whole of our being, and then live in such a way so that others might too.

That Love can still go to work on us, even through a strange old story about two bosom friends and a jealous, angry king with a spear. And if reading such a text with you, in this place, within the ancient Christian practice we call church, if this can broaden our compassion to include even that story's villain, who else might it grow toward in our lives? For whom might the bitter feelings of Saul that you and I carry in our bodies and in our bones be transformed by the way of Jesus until we can say truthfully to someone we once dismissed or despised, "May you, dear enemy, be free from suffering. May you know peace and joy"?

And if that's not what the experience of being delivered from the power of sin and death might feel like in an actual human life, I wonder what is?