

“Called to Compassion”

Colossians 3:12-17, 1John 4:7-12

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Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

Please look at that beautiful banner up there. I thank our worship committee for their great work for our worship service. The theme of Lent is “Wilderness Wanderings.” I encourage you to go to your own wilderness in your imagination. That cross will become bigger down the road every week as we get closer to Easter. There is a special altar decoration here, too: The sand is a metaphor of our wilderness as a place to encounter God. Our goal of wanderings in the wilderness is that we individually hope to rebuild our relationships with God while discovering God and the recovery of ourselves.

Let me ask you a question: **Where do you place God if you draw a diagram of your relationship between you and God?** Is God dwelling in you as your guide and counselor or outside checking up on you as the judge? Our first Scripture reading introduces a new understanding of God to us. Let’s start with one sentence in 1 John 4: 7-12. Will you look at verse 8? It says, “Whoever doesn’t love does not know God, because God is love.” Here the word, “Love” is not an ‘adjective’, but it is a ‘noun’. The Bible reminds us that if you don’t love, you cannot understand God. In other words, you can understand God through your act of loving others. Think about the most powerful loving experience that you have ever had in your life. No matter what it was, a loving experience is totally mutual, congenial and sharing without any condition between “you and I” relationship.

Recently, one of our church members shared this story about God’s love: There once was a man named George Thomas, a pastor in a small New England town. One Easter Sunday morning he came to the Church carrying a rusty and bent old bird cage, and set it by the pulpit. Pastor Thomas began to speak, “I was walking through town yesterday when I saw a young boy coming toward me swinging this bird cage. On the bottom of the cage were three little wild birds, shivering with cold and fright. I stopped the lad and asked, ‘What do you have there, son?’ ‘Just some old birds,’ came the reply. ‘What are you going to do with them?’ I asked. ‘Take ‘em home and have fun with ‘em,’ he answered. ‘I’m gonna tease ‘em and pull out their feathers to make ‘em fight.’ ‘How much do you want for those birds, son?’ The boy said, ‘\$10.’” The pastor reached in his pocket and took out a ten dollar bill. He placed it in the boy's hand. In a flash, the boy was gone. The pastor picked up the cage and gently carried it to the end

of the alley where there was a tree and a grassy spot. He opened the door and by softly tapping the bars persuaded the birds to come out, setting them free.

Well, that explained the empty bird cage on the pulpit, and then the pastor began to tell this story: One day Satan and Jesus were having a conversation. Satan said "I just caught a world full of people down there. Set me a trap, used bait I knew they couldn't resist. Got 'em all!" "What are you going to do with them?" Jesus asked. Satan replied, "Oh, I'm gonna have fun! I'm gonna teach them how to hate and abuse each other, how to drink and smoke and curse. I'm gonna teach them how to invent guns and bombs and kill each other. I'm really gonna have fun!" "How much do you want for them?" Jesus asked. "Oh, you don't want those people. They ain't no good. Why, you'll take them and they'll just hate you. They'll spit on you, curse you and kill you. You don't want those people!!" "How much?" Jesus asked again. Satan looked at Jesus and sneered, "All your blood, tears and your life." Jesus said, "DONE!" Then He paid the price. The pastor picked up the cage and walked from the pulpit.

During a time in the wilderness, I believe that Jesus prayed hard to figure out God's purpose, why he had to suffer and die on the cross. We know that our God didn't send His only Son because we are so weak, pathetic and poor to His eyes, but because we are his most precious sons and daughters, so He was willing to pay the price for the sake of saving us. But his sacrificial act of love doesn't require us to pay back to show our loyalty to him, but it re-established a loving and personal relationship with God. The famous Jewish theologian, Martin Buber wrote a classic book, "I and Thou (You)" in 1923. He defines that all actual life is encounter and talks about two different relationships in life: "I and Thou (You)" and "I and It". "I and Thou (You)" is a relationship that emphasizes the mutual, holistic existence of two beings. This relationship shows us a concrete encounter because these beings meet one another in their authentic existence without any qualification. This relationship is about mutuality, dialogue and meeting. God eventually comes to us in response to our welcome. If we don't have any relationship with God, it still remains an "I and It" relationship like a monologue.

When we say, "God is love", it doesn't mean a metaphysical concept of God who dwells in the heaven. Instead, God is actively engaged with us and dwelling in us offering caring, kindness, compassion and grace among us. In other words, as 1John reminds us, if we love one another we are born of God and know God. As God showed His love among us through Jesus Christ, we are called to love others in our lives. Love is not a 'noun' but a 'verb' which our Christian faith requires of us to show our love through actions. In our second Scripture reading in Colossians, Apostle Paul reminds us in the letter to the

Colossians saying, “As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion.” The word compassion derives from a Latin combination that means “to suffer with.” To clothe ourselves with compassion is to suffer with others. There is no power play in this caring act. Just based on mutuality, we share our love with others as God did by sending his Son to us without any condition. So when we clothe ourselves with compassion, we close our eyes to differences and open our hearts to a sojourner’s suffering.

Our Lenten study book helps us to enrich the meaning of compassion. Compassion is that we feel the other’s pain. But feeling, by itself, is not enough. As Henri Nowen states, “Compassion is hard because it requires the inner disposition to go with the others to the place where they are weak, vulnerable, lonely and broken.” It is true that compassion is not merely a sympathy card, but it also offers an ear to hear the story, the time to walk together, and a touch of kindness along the way. Last week was a powerful week for our family to experience our congregation’s caring and love. I realized that my wife is doing much better not only by the medications that the doctor gave her, but also by your care, prayer and sharing meals for us. I believe that these were stronger medications to heal her body and soul when she was in great need. I would encourage all of us to be compassionate Christians to others who are in need.

Martin Buber said that he wrote the book, “I and Thou” in his confession and in memory of one of his students who committed suicide. When he was a professor at a college, one day, one student desperately wanted to meet him, but he was busy with his work. He asked him to come back to him the day after, but it was too long for him to wait another night. The next day the student was found dead. This experience deeply shocked Buber’s soul. Sometimes, we often don’t realize the power of kindness and compassion to others. One small act of your kindness can change someone’s heart and even life.

Our goal of our Lenten journey is to find a meaningful encounter with God who is compassionate, loving and caring for you. Our God is not judgmental, but forgiving, not wanting to punish you but he grants you blessings. He loves to walk with you when you go along your path as your guide and you can trust him. That cross in the banner doesn’t symbolize your sacrifice, but God’s compassion and kindness to you. I hope that you can find an “I and Thou” compassionate relationship with God in this special journey of Lent.