

Be Compassionate

A Jesus-centered Retreat in Three Movements

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This resource is intended as a self directed retreat. It can be done in a single setting, but we recommend giving yourself three separate times of prayer and reflection, following the movements outlined below.

Before you begin:

1. Find a SUITABLE PLACE, a comfortable chair, maybe a prayer corner with candle, picture or symbol that will be an aid to a prayerful focus.

2. POSTURE: comfortable and relaxing posture -- choose a posture that enables you to be both relaxed and alert. Many postures are suitable for prayer, but as a general principle choose one that will be comfortable for longer periods at a time – having to constantly change position can be a distraction.

* It may help you to close your eyes and take a few deep breaths to relax and focus your attention. Sometimes the playing of soft instrumental music will help you relax.

3. ADOPT AN ATTITUDE OF SILENCE: Spend a few moments quieting yourself, becoming aware that you are placing yourself in the presence of God in an unhurried way. As you settle down to pray you may have lots of things on your mind. You may be tired, anxious, tense. Integrate these in your prayer, accept them, be aware of them, and bring them with you into the stillness and silence, within and without.

* Deliberately notice external sounds, and let them go

* Deliberately notice sensations in your body, and let them go

* Deliberately notice preoccupations of your mind, and let them go

4. COME TO PRAYER GENTLY: simply begin to anticipate your time of meeting God.

Movement #1: Understanding Compassion

Light a candle. Open your Bible and set it beside the lit candle. Pause to let silence well up within you. Begin gently and quietly.



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Speak these words aloud:

By signing myself with the cross in blessing, I also make a commitment to live in such a way that others might see the goodness in me that is God's presence.

Read it
for
yourself

Patterning Prayer on Jesus the Compassion of God

If our prayer life as disciples of Jesus is to be patterned on that of Jesus, it is very important that we understand Jesus, as presented in the Gospels, as the compassion of God. Jesus challenges us to: *“Be compassionate as God is compassionate” (Luke 6:36 – Jerusalem Bible).*

In the gospels, we are presented with the centrality of compassion in Jesus. *Compassion* is a particularly important word in the gospels. The stories told about Jesus speak of him having *compassion* and of his being moved with *compassion*. *For Jesus, compassion was the central quality of God and the central moral quality of life centered in God.* Likewise, we are called to be as compassionate as Jesus was toward everyone we encounter.

The Meaning of the Word “Compassion”

The English noun *compassion* comes from the Latin word that is a verb in Latin (*patior, pati passus sum*) which means “to feel” or “to suffer” and the prefix *cum* in Latin—means “with.” *Compassion* thus means **feeling with someone**, the feelings **of and for** somebody else in a visceral way. Most commonly, *compassion* is associated with feeling the suffering of somebody else and being moved by that suffering to do something. That is, the feeling of compassion leads to being compassionate. “Compassion” does not mean to feel sorry for the person.

Sacred
Pause

For Reflection: Examine yourself on how feeling sorry for someone might get in my way of being compassionate toward them.

Read it
for
yourself

Mercy and Compassion—A Real Difference

Mercy and compassion are not the same. In English, *mercy* and *merciful* most commonly imply a superior in relationship to a subordinate and also a situation of wrongdoing: one is merciful toward somebody to whom one has the right or power to act otherwise. Or one is merciful to another because that person has done something wrong. It's like the expression "throwing oneself on the mercy of the court." It implies that the judge and the court are in a superior relationship to the person who has done something wrong, and that person, who is the wrong-doer, seeks a lighter sentence from the court. *Compassion* implies something else. To paraphrase the poet William Blake, "mercy wears a human face, and compassion a human heart."

There is a Jewish story that drives this point home. According to the rabbinic story, God in heaven weeps when the Sea of Reeds (the Red Sea) swallows up the Egyptians who have been pursuing the Israelites. When the angels ask God why he is weeping, he says because the Egyptians are my people too, and I am feeling with them and suffering with them.

God suffers even with the enemies of the Israelites. He has compassion on the Egyptians. God suffers with God's people who are both the Israelites and the Egyptians. This is what it means to say that God is compassionate. God suffers with us.

Sacred
Pause

For Reflection: Do I confuse mercy and compassion?

Prayer Starter: Pray psalm 79:8 "O God, let your compassion come speedily to meet us."

Read it
for
yourself

Biblical Roots of Compassion

In the Hebrew Bible, which Christians call the Old Testament and which was Sacred Scripture for Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries, the word *compassion* has rich meaning. In the Hebrew language the word *rehem* usually translated as "compassion" is a noun that means "womb." *In the Hebrew Bible, compassion is both a feeling and a way of being that flows out of that feeling.*

Sometimes, the noun for womb *rehem* is very specifically linked to its association with what a woman feels, compassion for the child of her womb; a man feels compassion for his brother who comes from the same womb (see 1 Kings 3:26; Genesis 43:30). As a feeling, compassion is located in a certain part of the body—namely in the loins. In a woman, as one would expect, this means compassion is located in the womb (see Isaiah 49:15); in men, compassion is located in the bowels. Compassion, then, is to be understood as part of your innards, as visceral!

**Sacred
Pause**

**For Reflection: How do I react to the biblical roots of compassion?
Do you ever consider that compassion is visceral?**

***Prayer Starter: Pray with Psalm 145:9 "The Lord is good to all, and
his compassion is over all that he has made."***



Pompeo Batoni: The Prodigal

Public domain

Look at this picture in your prayer time now. What do you see? Whom do you see? What image of God does this painting suggest to you, gender aside.?

In this space write a prayer asking to be given the gift of compassion.

Movement #2: The Compassion of God

If you have taken a break and returned to the second movement, spend a little time recollecting your experience of the first movement. If you are continuing, get up, stretch, take a drink of water, and when you are fully ready, return.



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Read it
for
yourself

Compassion, God, and Jesus (see Exodus 33:19 and Luke 6:36)

As was mentioned earlier, the Hebrew word for “compassion” *rehem* means “womb” and it is often used to describe God in the Old Testament. Thus it speaks frequently of God as compassionate with the resonances of “womb” close at hand. This is implied in Exodus 33:19, by substituting the word “compassion” for the word “mercy.” Thus with the substitution the text can read: *“The Lord [said] and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and I will show compassion on whom I will show compassion” (Exodus 33:19).*

And so Jesus’ statement in the Gospel of Luke: *“Be compassionate as God is compassionate” (Luke 6:36)* is rooted in the Jewish tradition, most especially as articulated in Exodus 33:19. As an image for the central quality of God, *compassion* is striking. To say that God is compassionate is to say that God is “like a womb” or to say God is “womblike,” or to coin a word that does not exist in the English language but captures the flavor of the original Hebrew, God is “wombish.”

Sacred
Pause

For Reflection: What does it mean for me to be held in God’s womb?

Prayer Starter: Pray Psalm 90: 13 “Turn, O Lord, How long? Have compassion on your servants!”

God’s Compassion Imaged as Womb: Implications

What does it mean to say that God’s actions or behaviors are like a womb? *It means God surrounds us the way the sac of water surrounded us in the womb.* God nourishes us the way a mother’s womb nourishes an unborn baby. Metaphorically speaking, the word “womb,” applied to God, suggests a number of connotations. Like a mother’s womb, God is the one in whom we are conceived and gestate, who gives birth to us. As a mother loves the children of her womb, and feels for the children of her womb, so God loves and feels for us. This is best expressed in Isaiah 49:15 *“Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?”*

Even these may forget, yet I [God] will not forget you.” In its sense of “like a womb,” being *compassionate* has nuances of giving life, nourishing life, caring, embracing, protecting, warming, and encompassing. This idea of a compassion-filled God is also found in Psalm 103:13 *“As a father has compassion for his children so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him [hold him in awe].”* The prophet Hosea reminds us that God’s “compassion grows warm and tender” (Hosea 11:8). For Jesus, *this* is what God is like. This is the kind of God to whom Jesus prayed and to whom we address our prayers.

And, to complete the “imitation of God,” *“to be compassionate as God is compassionate”* (Luke 6:36) is to be like a womb, just as God is imaged as a womb. It is to feel as God feels and to act as God acts: in a life-giving and nourishing way. And this is exactly what Jesus did and how Jesus acted and what he asks of his disciples. *According to Jesus, compassion is to be a central quality of a life faithful to God, the endlessly compassionate One.*



For Reflection: Consider developing an action plan that will make compassion a central quality of your life.

Prayer Starter: Gracious and compassionate God, help me to be a gracious receiver of your compassion toward me. Help me to be compassionate toward others.



Aimé Morot (1880): The Good Samaritan



It’s time for some action!
Pause here in this second movement to make a decision for compassion. Think about the world around you. Who is waiting for a word of love and care?

With whom have you failed to feel their pain? Who have you found it possible to ignore, enjoying the comforts of your own life while suffering rages around you?

Take one step today. Grow in compassion for others by practicing compassion in your life.

Movement #3: The Gospel of Compassion

If you have taken a break and returned to the second movement, spend a little time recollecting your experience of the first movement. If you are continuing, get up, stretch, take a drink of water, and when you are fully ready, return.

Read it
for
yourself

Gospel Stories of Jesus as the Compassion of God

Throughout the gospels, we see Jesus mediating God's compassion. He did this in a variety of ways.

Jesus ate meals with social outcasts like Zacchaeus, the tax collector (Luke 19:2-19). Why did Jesus eat a meal with this hated tax collector?

Because Jesus could "feel with" Zacchaeus, the hate people extended toward him and, instead of continuing to hate, Jesus did what God would do and was compassionate and broke bread with Zacchaeus. The meals Jesus ate with riff-raff embodied his alternative vision of an inclusive community. The ethos of compassion led Jesus to include all in his table fellowship. The people with whom you break bread mediate the compassion of God.

Sacred
Pause

For Reflection: With whom do I need to break bread so as to share God's compassion with him or her?

Read it
for
yourself

The stories of Jesus' interactions with women in the Gospels are remarkable for their compassion.

Take, for example, Jesus' defense of the woman who outraged an all-male banquet, not only by entering, it but also by being unveiled and with hair unbraided and washing his feet and drying them with her hair (See: John 12:1-8; Mark 14:3-9; Matthew 26:6-13). In this story Jesus "feels with the woman." He had

compassion for the woman who washed his feet and told his disciples to leave her alone. Or, take for example, Jesus being hosted by Martha and Mary of Bethany and affirming Mary's role as a disciple (see John chapters 11 and 12). Or Jesus learning from the Syro-Phoenician woman and having compassion for her little daughter who was possessed by an unclean spirit (see Mark 7:24-30; Luke 7:36-50). Jesus felt her feelings and they melded together. Jesus cures the woman's daughter.

One of the most powerful stories about Jesus being compassionate is his encounter with the widow of Nain, which appears *only* in the Gospel of Luke (see Luke 7:11-15). In this story, the tragedy of the loss of a child, in this case a young man is a heartbreak that a mother experiences differently than anyone else. Jesus knew this, so he mediates to this woman the *womblike* compassion of God and raises her son from the dead. She said nothing, yet Jesus knew the ache she was experiencing. He felt it in his *bowels*, in his

innards. Jesus knew that in the society of the day, she would be powerless as a widow—a woman with no man in her life, in a patriarchal society, was rendered pauperized, impoverished and defenseless. But Jesus saw her with the compassionate eyes of God and not only returned her son to her, but also her dignity, worth, and meaning. Dignity, worth, and value are what Jesus, the compassion of God, gives to all of us. And we who are his disciples are to do likewise.



For reflection: When and how have I experienced the compassion of Jesus in my own life?



More Gospel Stories of Jesus Being Compassionate

The gospels are filled with stories of Jesus being compassionate. For example, in Matthew 9:36-37 Jesus has compassion on those who were harassed and helpless. Jesus feels *with them* as God feels with them. This is what compassion is all about. Jesus prays that the Lord of the harvest will send compassionate laborers—disciples.

In Matthew 14:14, (see 15:32-38; Mark 8:2; 6:34) Jesus has compassion for the crowd and cures the sick. Jesus gets out of the boat and “*feels with*” the people. He is not feeling sorry for them, he is sharing their feelings. It is because of Jesus’ compassion on the crowd that all are fed (see Matthew 15:32). In Mark 8:2, Jesus has compassion for the crowds and feeds them.

Likewise, in Mark 6:34, Jesus has compassion on the crowds for they are like sheep without a shepherd. One of the images for God in the Old Testament is that of shepherd. As the famous Psalm 23 proclaims: “*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*” Jesus knows full well the terrible feelings one has and a group has to be without God. We become like scattered sheep or ball bearings strewn on the floor. Jesus feels with the crowd and he is not feeling *sorry* for them, but rather is compassionate—“womb like” toward them and teaches them. Not to have sought for or experienced the compassionate presence of God is to be lost. Indeed, compassion and forgiveness go together.

In the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), it states that the father in the story, who represents God, saw his younger son returning home and was filled with compassion (see Luke 15:20) and ran to him. In the story, the father was disturbed at the loss of his son, in his very bowels, in his entrails, in his innards. Compassion is quite visceral.

Jesus has tremendous compassion on two blind men of Jericho (see Matthew 20:29-34).

Jesus, who is God Incarnate, God in human form, knows what it feels like, not being able to see. Jesus is compassionate toward the blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46) and Jesus is compassionate toward the man born blind (John 9:1ff).

Jesus is the ultimate expression of a compassionate God. He was sent as a vulnerable one into our cold world, calling forth compassion for the weak, as he still does.



For Reflection: Having read about the Gospel stories of Jesus being compassionate which one is your favorite. Reread it and try to imagine yourself in the story as the one receiving Jesus' loving compassion.

Prayer Starter: Jesus, help me to live a life filled with compassion patterned on your life. Help me to integrate forgiveness and compassion in all that I do.



Disciples of Jesus and Compassion

To be a disciple of Jesus is to be shaped by compassion. To be the church is to be a community that is compassionate toward all. To feel with the marginal, the poor, the disenfranchised, the homeless, is the hallmark of the disciple who practices compassion. St. Paul challenges us to *"clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience"* (Colossians 3:12).

And if we would be like Jesus in our lives, we will dedicate ourselves to seeking out the ones who dwell in the indignity of poverty or in a cardboard box under a bridge or those who are imprisoned of body, mind, or spirit. It is we who are to make God's compassionate embrace of us and everyone else, something more than a fairytale. It is we who are challenged to hold close those who most need to be soothed, warmed, reassured, and consoled. Why? Because all of us recall that God dared to do the same for us. God did it over two thousand years ago in Jesus. God does it still, and God will do it until the end of time. The only means that God has to do this is through us. Are we as compassionate toward others as God is compassionate toward *us*?

Concluding Prayer & Reflection

Gracious and compassionate God, I thank you for this time together on this retreat. Help me to go forth now and grow in my practice of compassion so I can become a disciple of your Son Jesus.

How as a baptized follower of Jesus will I go forth from this retreat changed? What new behaviors will I practice?