

COMPASSION

Ephesians 6:10-17, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

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Across my years in ministry, I have noticed that the days and weeks following national elections are times when people need a little extra pastoral care. There are always those who are excited and jubilant and want to celebrate and, of course, there are always those on the losing end of the election who are troubled and forlorn. I have always tried my best to be pastor to both groups, regardless of my own joy or dismay. It has long been my belief, rooted in the promises of the Gospel, that in the end, no matter who controls the White House or the Congress or the state legislature, we are always in God's good hands, and that in all things, God is working for good. My post-election counsel was also rooted in a pragmatic consideration – the simple fact that in my own experience, those I voted for never turned out to be as good as I had hoped, and those I had not voted for seldom turned out to be quite as bad as I had feared.

I hope that will be true again in these next years. The last two weeks, though, the pastoral conversations of these last weeks have been different in tenor. Perhaps because of the shrill and strident tone of the campaigns, full of racial animus, and maybe because of the open and unmuffled threats to whole groups of people, there is still so much anxiety and even fear as the votes continue to be tallied. It's not so much personal fear that many have expressed, for indeed many of us here are sufficiently privileged to be able to survive changes of congressional leadership. It is rather a fear in behalf of those who are especially vulnerable, or fear of actions that may cause great harm, or fear of what governance – or lack thereof – will look like.

In the wake of such expressed fears, I was reminded of a troubling, but compelling commentary I heard some years ago in the NPR series called "This I Believe." People from all walks of life submitted short *credos* for that series, brief statements of some truth they held close. Most were positively framed: "I believe in the strength of community," "I believe in resilience" – that sort of thing. But one disturbing credo was offered by a Chinese immigrant to this country, and it caught me off guard. He began, "I believe in a potential for *brutality*." The writer was Yinong Young-Xu, who came to this country from Shanghai when he was sixteen. He now holds a doctorate from Harvard and specializes in treating post-traumatic stress disorder.

When I was six, in the streets of Shanghai, near the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, I watched a parade of trucks carrying political dissidents on their way to be publicly executed. At the front of each truck was a young man, roped from head to toe, wearing a sign that read, "Counter-revolutionary." If not for that, you would have had trouble guessing what the event was. There was an air of festivity; thousands of bystanders were laughing, talking.... It was like a traditional Chinese New Year's celebration — except the city was celebrating its own brutality.

I believe we are brutal because innocence can be corrupted, like mine was as a six-year-old in a time of revolution. When I entered first grade, I started to wave flags, denounce

the politically fallen of the day and shout, “Death to counter-revolutionaries!” My friends and I did not want to miss any of the meetings where political dissidents were publicly tortured and humiliated. That was entertainment for us....

.... I believe brutality is a disease just like cancer; each and every one of us is at risk, including me.... When our better instincts are suppressed, isn't that the beginning of brutality? I am fortunate. I was too young to be a Red Guard where my brutality would have been codified. And I had a grandmother who showed me the value of kindness....

I wish we could learn to prevent hatred [and brutality] from forming.... I teach my children that hitting is not allowed, period. I encourage them to be compassionate, to aid those in need, and to stand up for the weak. Most of all, I try to be vigilant over the purity of my motives and cautious about my actions. I believe I must guard against my own potential for brutality and the mutation of my own humanity.¹

As I listened to people expressing their fears these last two weeks and read numerous reports of verbal and physical assaults on racial and religious minorities in the days around the election, I thought of Yinong Young-Xu. I confess that I do worry about what some of my friends might be facing in the months ahead – maybe at the hands of our government, but more likely at the hands of some of the hate groups now invited back into the mainstream of American life. Yinong Young-Xu was right, I think: it is so important to teach kindness to our children and guard against the mutation of our humanity. Or, as we in the Christian community would say it, it is important for us to be the Church – to lean into Christ's self-giving love, to labor for justice and equity, for the embrace of the immigrants and sojourners in our midst, for kindness and compassion toward all we meet... including those who see the world differently, who vote differently, and who think differently than we do.

Ultimately, being the Church – being Christian – in our time is about much more than any election. The struggle for light amid darkness, the struggle against the diminishing of our humanity is not, or *not only*, a political struggle, but a more cosmic battle. As Paul said to the Ephesians, “our struggle is not with flesh and blood, but against the rulers, the authorities, against the cosmic forces of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” It is against such principalities and powers that Paul invites the Christian community to put on the whole armor of God. It is for such a struggle that we are called to be the Church – to do justice, to love kindness, to hate evil and hold fast to what is good, to rejoice in hope, to be steadfast in prayer. To *be* the Church – guarding against the diminishing of our humanity and, indeed, reaching out to those who are vulnerable and under assault, standing with and for all those who find themselves discounted and discarded.

Of all the tasks of Christian faithfulness, perhaps none is more important to embrace today than compassion. *Compassion* means literally “to suffer with.” It's a learned behavior, a honed instinct, born and nurtured in *relationship*. Says one Christian teacher,

¹ Yinong Young-Xu, “A Potential for Brutality,” in Jay Allison and Dan Gediman, eds., *This I Believe II: More Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2008, 230-232.

The call to compassion is not about somebody “doing for” somebody else. Rather, its value is in the ... relationship ... in which everyone is changed. The Hebrew prophets say that we find our own good in seeking the common good. The prophet Isaiah says that when we feed the hungry, take in the homeless, and “break the yoke” of oppression, we find *our own healing*. He also says the act of compassion requires that you “not hide yourself from your own flesh.” In other words, *compassion* means recognizing the kindred spirit we all share together.²

Compassion goes beyond random acts of kindness; it takes kindness beyond sympathy to empathy, to the embrace of another’s pain or distress. It is a virtue especially important in this post-election time when feelings and emotions are still a bit raw. But it is also a timely virtue for every single day. We who have known God’s love and hospitality and compassion need to remember who and whose we are, and such memory means remembering our calling to demonstrate such love and hospitality and compassion to everyone, not just to some. Remember your baptism, people of faith. Remember your calling. Remember your compassion.

I am haunted by Yinong Young-Xu and his memory of the festive crowds in Shanghai gathered for summary executions, troubled by his residual belief in our potential for brutality. But there are other stories to tell. So, I share with you a counter-story – a true story told a few years ago by the poet Naomi Shihab Nye, who grew up as the child of a Palestinian father and an American mother. In a post that went viral on social media, she told of one night in an airport in New Mexico:

Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning my flight had been delayed for four hours, I heard an announcement: “If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.”

Well – one pauses these days. Gate A-4 was my own gate. I went there. An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. “Help,” said the flight service person. “Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this.”

I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke to her haltingly [in Arabic]. The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, “No, we’re fine, you’ll get there, just later; who is picking you up? Let’s call him.”

We called her son and I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her – Southwest. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up about two hours.

² Jim Wallis, *Who Speaks for God?* New York, Delacorte, 1996, as cited at <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/excerpts.php?id=14195>, accessed May 5, 2015.

She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade *mamool* cookies – little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts – out of her bag – and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo – we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie.

And then the airline broke out free beverages from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving us all apple juice and they were covered with powdered sugar, too. And I noticed my new best friend – by now we were holding hands – had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and I thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate – once the crying of confusion stopped – seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women, too.

This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.³

I think she's absolutely right. Isn't that the world we all want to live in? And we can, if we can let go of our disdain for those who are different and embrace simple compassion – the capacity to see the other as one sees oneself, recognizing our common humanity, and reaching out to the other's hunger and pain and fear. For us, the Church, we can embrace *Christian* compassion – which is the capacity to see one's own face mirrored in the face of another and to recognize there, upon closer examination, the very face of Christ.

Part of embodying such compassion in our time is recognizing that we need each other. *All of us* need each other. If we are to live faithfully in these days, we will not do so alone. We need each other. Young and old. Rich and poor. Gay and straight. Christian, Muslim, and Jew. Republicans, Democrats and all those who eschew such labels. We need each other.

Paul was talking to the community of saints in Corinth, but he might as well have been talking to all of us, when he told that deeply divided congregation that they were *one body*. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you.’” We need each other. We are all in this together. So be kind. Be compassionate. You may not change those who stand against you. But if you remember to be the Church, they will not, in the end, change you. And who knows? Maybe there will be cookies.

³ Naomi Shihab Nye, “Gate A-4,” <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/gate-4>. Accessed November 13, 2018.