

“Compassion First”

Rev. Maeve Kieran Hammond

Song of Solomon 2:10-13 | Romans 7:15-20

5 July 2026

In my office, I have this bookmark hanging up [show to congregation]. You may even recognize it. Last spring, Fred Greene’s family created and gave out bookmarks at his memorial service at the church. There are two sides to the bookmark. The back is a poem by Mary Oliver called “In the Blackwater Woods.” The front is a picture of Fred with his name, the day he was born, the day he died, a message from his family, and a quote from the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. The quote reads, “Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible.” I have this bookmark next to my mirror in my office. I don’t pass it every time I’m in my office, but I pass it often enough to have memorized the Fourteenth Dalai Lama’s words: “Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible.” Fred was such a beautiful embodiment of kindness. The photo on his bookmark even embodies his compassionate, loving, and attentive presence—it’s somewhat amazing and surprising that a 2D, flat image could convey so much personality and so much warmth.

I think some of you know that I really enjoy studying the intersection of spirituality, psychology, and emotions in my free time. I’m currently reading a book called *The Compassionate Mind: A New Approach to Life’s Challenges* by Dr. Paul Gilbert, PhD, professor at the University of Derby in the United Kingdom. Dr. Gilbert is the founder of Compassion Focused Therapy, also known as CFT. Compassion Focused Therapy integrates psychotherapy, human evolution, neuroscience, and Buddhism. In the introduction to *The Compassionate Mind*, Dr. Gilbert defines “compassion” as “a basic kindness, with a deep awareness of the suffering of oneself and of other living things, coupled with the wish and effort to relieve it” (xiii). Boiling down the definition to its

essential parts, Dr. Gilbert says “compassion” is kindness, awareness of suffering, and the effort to relieve suffering. *Kindness, awareness of suffering, and the effort to relieve suffering.*

We humans are a bit strange compared to other beings in the animal kingdom. We evolved with big heads, complex and pattern-seeking thinking brains, and a basic survival need for compassion. Whereas other animals stay with their caregiver for a few weeks, a few months, or, at most, a few years, we humans require constant emotional and physical care. We form deep attachments almost from the moment of our birth with our caregivers, and these attachments shape how we interact and form connections with other people over the course of our lives. This is a bit *odd*, isn't it, compared to the rest of the animal kingdom? We literally require compassion to survive infancy and childhood. While we may not survive without compassion in adulthood, living with no compassion would make life a heck of a lot harder.

As followers of Christ and worshippers of the Holy Trinity, we believe that Jesus Christ is the physical *and* spiritual manifestation of compassion. Jesus, the human, demonstrated what it means to be a compassionate sibling and neighbor through his boundary-breaking ministry. He broke bread with society's most vulnerable and marginalized people. He spoke in parables that turned “order” and “expectation” on their head, often elevating the poor and the misunderstood. He says, in Luke 5, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” What is more compassionate than welcoming “sinners” into your arms and offering them your service?

Beyond the compassionate actions of Jesus, though, we have the spiritual presence of the mystical Christ. God created each of us with intention and love. As

Psalm 139 reads, “You [God] are the one who created my innermost parts; you knit me together while I was still in the womb.” God lives within all Created beings, and God lives within us. We can think of that “God-life” as our “Christ-self,” our true nature where goodness, abundance, mercy, and compassion live. As imperfect beings, we often find ourselves struggling between the divine call of our Christ-self, of our innate compassion, and the call of our humanness. I’m not saying this to demonize, belittle, or create a strict division or hierarchy between the spirit and the body. Rather, I hope to emphasize the reality that we are mammals and products of evolution. Over hundreds of thousands of years, humans have developed survival needs and instincts. Anxiety, fear, rage, scarcity mindsets, and even tribalism can be traced back to the early roots of our species. Our desires to be liked by other people, to gain and hoard as many resources as possible, to align ourselves with certain groups and position ourselves over others, and to act in ways that feel irrational to our modern sensibilities are byproducts of evolution and tactics that kept our early ancestors safe.

Our need to feel safe and in control can overpower our instincts for compassion, however. Thereby, our need to feel safe and in control can overpower our connection to our Christ-self, our source of goodness, abundance, mercy, and compassion. We hear early Christ-followers struggling with this same predicament that we face as individuals and as a people: how do we find our Christ-self and act compassionately in the face of perceived threat, insecurity, instability, or loss of control?

Our New Testament reading from the Letter to the Romans explores this theme. The Apostle Paul calls our overpowering need to feel safe and in control above all else

“sin.” The next time you consider what sin means to you, perhaps you could think about this passage. This comes from Romans 7:

15 I don't know what I'm doing, because I don't do what I want to do. Instead, I do the thing that I hate.... 17 But now I'm not the one doing it anymore. Instead, it's sin that lives in me.... 18 The desire to do good is inside of me, but I can't do it. 19 I don't do the good that I want to do, but I do the evil that I don't want to do. 20 But if I do the very thing that I don't want to do, then I'm not the one doing it anymore. Instead, it is sin that lives in me that is doing it.

I don't know what I'm doing, because I don't do what I want to do. Isn't this so relatable?

At times, we find ourselves acting out of alignment with our values. We hurt others, we repeat patterns that cause suffering, we choose ease of convenience over lasting sustainability, we act out of shame or fear before we think, we assume rather than listen, and we even treat ourselves poorly. Yet, perhaps we can take comfort in the fact that, clearly, we are not the first humans to do this or to feel this dissonance between our Christ-self and our humanness. *Why did I do that?* You may wonder at times. *Why in the world did I say or do those things? That's not me.*

We are worshiping today over Independence Weekend, and the 250th anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence may feel complicated for some of us. Perhaps you, like me, grew up hearing that we should put “Country First” or “Nation First.” While patriotism can be a beautiful and moving way to find pride in our home and connection with others, it can be hard to practice patriotism if we do not align with the actions or ideologies of our government. When we feel let down, disturbed, or ashamed by our government and our elected officials, I invite us to remember our Christ-selves and remember that compassion is at the foundation of Jesus's ministry. Instead of becoming hateful, vengeful, numb, or apathetically indifferent to the news, can we find some compassion in ourselves? If we hear a

particular group or identity is being targeted or treated unfairly, instead of shaking our fists at the sky, can we extend compassion by donating to a good cause or a legal rights group? Can we follow Christ's teaching to love our enemies by compassionately praying for the people we perceive as antagonists, oppressors, or opponents?

There is truth, and perhaps comfort, in the fact that we can choose to do better and live more in accordance with our values. There is truth and comfort, too, in the fact that our Christ-self lives within us and is accessible to us, thanks be to God. With the help of the Spirit, we can return to our Christ-selves and act compassionately, no matter the circumstance and no matter how our feelings or impulses may affect us. For a visual metaphor of the act of returning to our Christ-selves in the midst of chaos, confusion, or hurt, consider these words from the Song of Solomon (a book that's very rarely in our lectionary!): "Rise up, my dearest, my fairest, and go. Here, the winter is past; the rains have come and gone. Blossoms have appeared in the land, the season of singing has arrived" (SoS 2:10-12). Even in the harshest weather, we can find strength, fortitude, and light within ourselves to blossom and sing.

How do we find our Christ-selves, though, when compassion feels far out of reach? Slow down. Think to yourself these words "compassion first." *Compassion first.* Take a deep breath if you need to or go for a walk. Remove yourself from a situation that is causing you to think unkindly or want to act in a potentially harmful way. Connect with your Christ-self. You can picture Christ coming to you and sitting with you in your mind's eye. You can repeat a prayer that calms you, like "Lamb of God, have mercy on me," or a mantra that speaks to you, like the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's "Be kind

whenever possible. It is always possible.” When you come back to the situation, assume good intentions all around - just this simple reframe can go a long way.

Friends, may we rejoice in the truth of our Christ-self. May we, with God’s help, live unconditionally compassionate lives. Amen.