

Comprehensive Compassion ~ Kinship with All Creation

Sermon on John 10:11-16

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Trinity United, Ottawa

Rev. Ellie Barrington, M.Div.

“I know my own and my own know me and I lay down my life for my sheep... other sheep that do not belong to this fold, I must bring them also.”

The writer of John has Jesus claiming his good shepherd role to sheep beyond his fold. The shepherd's calling to protect his sheep at any cost, is not only for those sheep that belong to him. Christianity has always taught us to care for and protect all outsiders and all who are vulnerable, not just our own children. At the time of the Gospel writing, this reference likely had to do with Gentiles as outsiders, or factions of different Christian groups. But today, I hear Jesus calling to us through this story, encouraging us to stretch that 'mother bear instinct' to protect our own young, to enfold those who are not biologically ours. It asks us to reach out for those who are not instinctively covered by the bonds of kinship.

The Christian calling to kinship with all of God's vulnerable Creation is crucial in today's world. The hard truth is, that if we fail to heed that calling, this century will likely become the 'last call' for what the 'big picture' scientists refer to as 'the human project'.

To play with the animal metaphor of the story, good Christians need to be good shepherds not just to our own sheep. We need to be 'mother bears' to polar bears - and to trees and to ethnic peoples. We must discover our own gut imperative to care for all endangered species - human, animal, plant, insect, mineral and microbial...because we all depend on each other for survival. If we do not internalize this imperative - and begin to act accordingly - we are signing the invitation to our own human extinction.

All of Creation is an interdependent web. A bacteria that goes extinct in the

rainforest may have been our antidote to cancer. A regime of terror in Africa may come home here to roost, when traumatized child refugees act out their instinctive fear on our streets.

What happens to ‘others’ does effect us....but even if we know it, we don’t always feel it. At this moment, government-sponsored violence in the Sudan is escalating into ethnic cleansing. Are those people, at risk for their lives, ‘our sheep’? Do we feel enough connection to protect them? I have to admit, I feel more like the hired hand than a shepherd in this situation.

So I was impressed to hear on the news that over the Passover weekend, the Jewish community in Canada organized a remarkably effective green ribbon campaign, lobbying our federal politicians to intervene against this impending genocide in Darfur. The Jewish people, who have known genocide, are claiming as kin a distant people who are threatened with genocide. They are reaching across the waters to protect those ‘other sheep,’ of a different colour and religion. It is a movement from the heart as well as the head. A well organized action of compassion...for Jews can well imagine how those people in Darfur feel.

Do we feel called to do the same? My emphasis here is on feeling. What activates us to reach out and take risks for others? Usually it is more that information or exhortation. We don’t protect our children because we ‘should’, do we? Our protective instincts seem to come from the gut and the heart more than from thought. Protectiveness is fed by instinct and imagination, rather than just information. We feel a threat to those we love, as if it were a threat to our very self. That is compassion - feeling with the other. Compassion is a powerful invisible force that motivates and moves us. Compassion depends on being able to imagine how the other feels. Compassion is notably the word that best translates what we know as Jesus’ great commandment to love. Jesus told us to ‘feel with’ the other, as if they were our self. Not always an easy project! It can involve an imaginative and intuitive stretch.

On Tuesday, a score of us gathered in the Friendship Room to watch and discuss

what Alex describes as ‘a big picture’ video, called “Earth’s Imagination”. It is part of a series by a renowned physicist and evolutionary cosmologist Brian Swimme, colleague with two of today’s great Christian eco-theologians Thomas Berry and Matthew Fox. (Fox is speaking in town - this Friday!)

With great passion, Brian Swimme explains how the human brain is evolving toward wider circles of compassion...towards our potential for what he calls Comprehensive Compassion...a felt kinship with all of Creation.

Archeological evidence from skeletons tells us, for instance, that it was in Cro Magnon’s time that hominids started taking care of injured young, rather than leaving them to die. Someone with a broken leg, previously a ‘fatal injury,’ was fed and carried by the Cro Magnon group so that she was able to survive and mature. That was a big evolutionary step in human compassionate action!

Swimme confronts us with the imminent end of the ‘human project’ because we are exhausting the Earth’s resources to feed us...topsoil is endangered, not just species. But he is not a messenger of doom, but a visionary with hope. He traces the evolution of the human brain and envisions our capacity to save the race, by saving the whole earth project - using our imaginations and expanding our capacity for compassion. He suggests that it is our capacity to imagine that will save us, by activating our capacity to feel compassion in ever widening circles and therefore invent new ways to sustain all the interdependent life forms. First the vulnerable human child, eventually the vulnerable organism.

Human imagination is the key to comprehensive compassion. Our imagination moves us from knowing in our heads, to feeling in our hearts and guts. If you hear on the radio news about how many have died in the Sudan, you may note it. But if you hear a story about a particular child there with a name and a face, your heart will align with your head and more likely you will want to do something for him. If you hear how many species face extinction this year, you will know it is bad news. If I show you a video of a really cute baby animal, you will likely begin to feel

concern for it and its kin. You may even come up with a clever idea to mobilize others to protect that species.

I admit that I often want to protect myself from feeling compassion. I avoid watching the news before bed, because my gut gets so involved that I can't sleep. I feel hurt for the frightened people. I feel debilitated if I feel their fear and cannot act.

So I've become selectively compassionate. I let in the feeling when I see there is something I can do. Then my compassion with the pain of the other brings me to a good feeling place...by motivating me to do something that helps.

We all need to stretch our capacity to 'feel with' the other, in new places where we can make some positive small difference. It will save not only them, but us. Because, of course, we are all one in God. We are all part of the one fold. Jesus told us that there is to be but one flock, one shepherd.

So let us dare to imagine where we are needed and how we might act. Let us dare to feel with some of the endangered others. Let us dare to pray with our full imaginations, envisioning safety and joy for the whole Creation flock, one by one. Let us even risk a little of our comfort, to bring some of them to safety with the fold.

Therein, I believe, lies the Christian hope for the human project.

Let us sing up a love and compassion that stretches our imagination into prayer and action... At #333 in Voices United, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling."