The sweet Eye of love and compassion never ceases to gaze at us.
—Julian of Norwich

To reach the goal of compassion we must not stop with the first gaze. It is the second gaze that we struggle and wait for most of our lives. In the first half of life, we have a critical mind and a demanding heart and a lot of impatience. These characteristics are both gifts and curses, as you might expect. We cannot risk losing touch with either our angels or our demons. They are both good teachers. The trials of life invariably lead us to a second gaze. This is the gaze of compassion and patience.
—Richard Rohr

Ancient Witness: John 8:2-11

There are so many things going on in our world today that require our attention: unaccompanied children migrating to our southern border by the thousands; bombs falling in Palestine where hundreds of people have been killed, most of them innocent civilians, many of them children. We need perspective. We seek to have vision unclouded by fear and anger.

This reminds me of a favorite poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay:

Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour,
Rains from the sky a meteoric shower
Of facts... they lie unquestioned, uncombined.
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
Is daily spun; but there exists no loom
To weave it into fabric.

We need help to weave the fabric of wisdom. And many of us also struggle daily with personal circumstances—experiences of loss, disappointment and failure. We seek to have vision not occluded by sorrow and anxiety.

We struggle for an unclouded view. There’s a wonderful Chinese saying:

When the eye is unobstructed there is sight.
When the heart is unobstructed there is joy.
When the mind is unobstructed there is truth.

And so we work to remove all obstructions. “Loving means seeing,” said Anthony de Mello. “Love is not blind; it is clear sighted.” What does that mean? Well, I think about the love of a parent for a child.

There’s something about the love of a parent, be it a foster parent, an adoptive parent, or a biological parent, that is able to see things that other kinds of love cannot see, in a clear sighted
way. This kind of love is able to see beauty and value when it is not so obvious to the eyes of others. I’m sure you’ve all heard the phrase, “a face that only a mother could love.” The love of a parent has the ability to see beyond appearances, beyond the exterior, to the beauty and the value within.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why parents tend to think of their children as being “special.” A parent on the first day of school is telling the teacher that their child is not like all the others. And with patience, wisdom and understanding the teacher replies, “Of course.” The wise teacher is not placating the parent, because the teacher knows that all children are special. The teacher can never see the child the ways the parent does, but the teacher knows enough to have a sense of the mystery that each one is precious, beautiful and unique. The teacher understands, respects and honors what the parent sees.

This, it seems to me, is how God sees each of us. Like parents who lovingly gaze at their child, God sees everything that is tender and beautiful. May we understand, respect and honor what God sees.

Now, when we see the world through God’s eyes, of course we see the faults, weaknesses and mistakes. I’m not saying that we turn a blind eye to these at all. In fact, they may become even more visible to us. But what I am saying is that they do not matter in the deepest sense. God is able to look beyond these things to see that precious essence. It reminds me of a poem by that great Sufi mystic, Rumi,

*Our beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,*  
there is a field. I’ll meet you there.

God views the world from this place that is beyond right and wrong, good and bad. To see others through God’s eyes we go to this field in which what they have done or haven’t done is irrelevant to their worth! So observe the good and the bad in the world, by all means, but look beyond them to see as God sees.

The vision of God is not coldly objective, but it is colored by love. It is not neutral. It is filled with pathos. It is able to look beyond right and wrong to see the precious core of who we are. It sees the divine imprint, the sacred essence.

You know, in ancient Greek there are three words translated as “love” in the Christian New Testament. Eros is romantic love. It’s longing, desire and attraction for another. Nowhere is eros or erotic love condemned, by the way. Philios is friendship, when we have shared interests and commitments with others. You have this with people you like, who you want to hang out with. Agape is the Greek word that is in the commandment to love one’s neighbor and to love one’s enemy. It is unconditional love, love without expecting anything in return.

In the field of psychology, Carl Rogers coined the term, “unconditional positive regard.” And this is when the therapist shows complete acceptance toward another person. Now, this doesn’t mean that one agrees with the other or condones their behavior. It simply means that there is an inherent worth, a pricelessness and dignity within every human being.

And this, I believe, is what God sees; this is how God loves. This is the basic spiritual awareness that Jesus and other spiritual masters were trying to communicate. This is what it means to live in the “realm of God.”
And this, by the way, is how a spiritual community differs from a social action group. It is concerned about this inner dimension—this inward journey—as well as the outer actions of doing good and helping others. Jesus, for example, had this inner awareness, and his mission was to help others discover the joy of this awareness as well. “The Kingdom of God is within you,” he said. It’s right under your nose. This is why we worship, why we gather: to help raise this awareness to the surface.

You know, some marriage therapists talk about three stages of the married or committed relationship:
1. The honeymoon phase. This is the first year or two. It is that wonderful starry-eyed period.
2. The second phase is when we say, “I love you but you’re going to have to change.”
3. And the final stage—and many marriages don’t make it here—is when we say, “I love you and accept you the way you are.”

That is, if marriages are to progress and thrive, they must incorporate this unconditional positive regard. They must add to Eros and Philios, Agape.

And for congregations and faith communities, this is true, too. There are a lot of causes that we agree about—a lot of shared interests. But every congregation has differences, too. It has diversity and disagreement. We need to make decisions and set priorities, and not everybody gets their way. Like marriages, these differences don’t magically disappear, but what is needed is a baseline of unconditional positive regard toward each other and the world.

One of my favorite present-day spiritual teachers, Richard Rohr, calls this way of seeing the world the “second gaze.” He writes,

> My immediate response to most situations is with reactions of attachment, defensiveness, judgment, control and analysis. I am better at calculating than contemplating. Let’s admit that we all start there. The False Self seems to have the “first gaze” at almost everything. The first gaze is seldom compassionate. It is too busy weighing and feeling itself: “How will this affect me?” or “How can I get back in control of this situation?”

> ...Only after God has taught us how to live “undefended” can we immediately stand with and for the other, and in the present moment. It takes lots of practice.

And so this second gaze, the gaze of compassion, is about learning to see as God sees. It is, as Rohr says, “looking out at life from a place of Divine Intimacy.” And this takes discipline and practice.

There is this great quote from Thomas Merton about what it means to see as God sees:

> Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time, there would be no war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.

And Merton was talking about seeing others the way God sees them.
You’ve all, no doubt, heard that famous saying of Jesus, “Judge not lest you be judged.” A much better translation, however, is not “judge” but “condemn.” Do not condemn. Because you see, we need to just the actions of people all the time as right or wrong, good or bad. This is necessary.

But we do not write them off or judge them in an *absolute* sense. We acknowledge that at the *core of their reality*, there is always a *secret beauty*, and they are precious! They are beloved!

Sure we see the weaknesses and the failings, but this is never enough to condemn someone—to stone them—to negate the *unconditional positive regard* that God has for them, *the person each one is in God’s eyes*. In the words of Jesus, “Neither do I condemn you.” And to see others as God sees them, neither do we.

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*

**Call to Commitment:** Richard Rohr

*So now in my later life, contemplation and compassion are finally coming together. This is my second gaze. It is well worth waiting for, because only the second gaze sees fully and truthfully. It sees itself, the other, and even God with God’s own eyes, which are always eyes of compassion. It is from this place that true action must spring.*