

***The Only Rule is Compassion:
Developing an Ethical Center***

Lake Street Church of Evanston

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Today's reading from scripture is pretty nice, huh? I picked it, and I picked it because I think that it shows Jesus' true ethical center – a center of compassion, of strategic rule breaking in favor of those who have not, of some radical love and ability to heal people even when the naysayers were there in the room with him. That's the center of who Jesus is to me – compassion. And yet, there are these glimpses that Jesus didn't exactly always act from that center. There's a very famous piece of scripture where Jesus gets caught with his compassion down in which a Syrophenician woman. Let's read for a moment from Matthew 15:21-38:

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

And so Jesus ignores this person, doesn't even speak to her in her moment of need because of who she was – a woman and not Jewish. His disciples ask him to send her away, than he calls her a dog. Not exactly compassionate, and not exactly a story where you want to follows Jesus' lead. He's not exactly showing off his Son of God status here – he is all too frail and human. Maybe he was tired, or irritated, or just misogynistic, but HE is certainly not compassionate. It is the woman's deft use of words to call him to account that finally rallies his sense of compassion to heal this woman's son. By the end of the story, Jesus has returned to acting from his ethical core. I would say in our first Gospel reading and finally at the end of this reading Jesus responded to the needs in front him, from his ethical center. In most of our second reading, he reacts. There are miles of space between reacting and responding, as we see in our Gospel readings.

These are trying times, and they reveal who we are as a community and as individuals. I got a couple of questions from a phrase that I tend to use about acting from an ethical center, from a place that is at the core of who you are, without which you might find that your actions upon further reflection don't exactly match up with who you

thought you were or who you want to be. Of course, the slippage here between your ethical core and your actions is always going to be there, but the idea is to at least make that slippage smaller and your actions more in line with who you are. So, how do you go about making that ethical center for yourself?

I have 3 recommendations for you today:

First, dive into your wisdom traditions to find out what speaks to you in this moment. Is compassion what you feel called to, is it forgiveness, or contemplation, or justice? Put a name to it, and get stories around it. Our ancient traditions that we celebrate here have so much to offer us in the way of stories, because that is their real power. They show superheroes, villains, regular folks, and regular folks who become the heroes and villains all trying to make meaning in the world. When I think about my own ethical center, it is in large part formed by Jesus' teachings. When I read scripture, I see a challenging document emboldening us to extend our love of actual neighbors and families to perfect strangers, to widen our scope, to see them as God sees us. To have compassion. What stories inspire you?

Second, dive into your own stories to see what can inform your ethical center. Everyone here and outside of these 4 walls has a story, and what stories they are if you take a second to hear them. They are stories of life, love, struggle, overcoming, resilience, poverty, riches, greed, generosity, hopelessness, and hope. They are stories that have a real meaning to them. Our faith comes alive when we put those stories into conversation with each other and with ancient texts. Without our stories, those other stories in our wisdom traditions are dead.

Third, before you go out into the world and start putting them to use, go within yourself and spend some time reflecting about who you are and why your actions matter. It's a great pernicious lie that people would have you believe that nothing we do or how we do it matters. At the very least it ought to matter to us, but why does it. You probably have to answer that question for yourself, along with the question of what kind of person you'd like to be on a daily basis: kind, compassionate, generous, what? What are you becoming, because we are all becoming something.

So – easy steps: start with the stories of our tradition, add your own stories, and get in touch with your inner life. If you do that, then you are well on your way to developing an ethical center.

I believe that we live in a time when people want you to react and not respond. They want you to betray your values in outrage, not in the service of your highest ideals, but in vindictiveness. The world needs ethically centered people, and people who are in touch with themselves as well as the great wisdom of the world. They need it now more than ever. So, the next time you get angry, or troubled, or get ready to do something, ask where it comes from. Does it serve your highest good and that of your neighbor? Does it make a more flourishing world? Is it in service of your highest best ideals? Would you be a better person for having done it? Take some time and ask yourself these questions

before you react. If you do, you may find some clarity of purpose, some real centering of your self in an anxious world. I am of the opinion that this is precisely what our world needs in the present moment. Ethically centered people acting on that center of themselves. For me, the only rule is compassion. If my actions and the actions of others are compassionate, then they may be misguided, foolish, incompetent, or imperfect in some way, as long as it is centered in compassion. That makes sense to me. Does it always work? Absolutely not. In that we can be assured we are in good company – after all, even Jesus didn't get it right all the time. But we have to be open just like that second set of verses to being called to account, to being re-awakened to the center of our being.

Blessed Be.