

A Lenten Study for Individual and Group Study

As we journey with Jesus to the inevitable Holy Week and Easter Sunday, the term “passion” is used to describe those days and events. A lot of people think of that word in the context of emotions, love as in feeling passionate about something be it work, a hobby, a person, and or cause to list a few things. In romance novels there is always the writing of passionate love. In another time, however, the word was more related to suffering. This is considered to be an “obsolete” use of the word, and when I looked it up online, sure enough there was an image of red lip stick covered lips to symbolize the word!

This old use of the old is still the root of another word used and I have used it to describe our journey with Jesus of his ministry of com-passion. That prefix “com” means “to be with” so literally “compassion” signifies to suffer with. Again, that isn’t quite what we expect of the word today. And when I do an online search for its meaning or definition it is all about wanting to help someone, no lips. So it is in the word com=passion that we go back to the obsolete usage of suffering but now suffering together.

Most of us know the following Gospel stories, and they are stories that were told about Jesus at one time by word of mouth and then decades, even centuries, after his time they were put down into writing by several persons into different narrative accounts. As we use this Season for reflection I would like us to read them again, in silence to ourselves, out loud as they would have been told to ourselves and to others, and then as I have been suggesting each Sunday to carefully, or to be full of care, as to what we have read and heard.

There are some who read and listen and that’s the end of it as they go by what you see is what you get. There are others, like myself, who as a story-teller and a story-writer, have all sorts of things to ask, to want to know, and to talk about. You can do either or you can do both. And if you have something to share or want to know more with others in our community of faith, during this Season before the Sunday service at 9am our deacon will hold a time to do so.

We do this as the hymn made popular by another story-journey about Jesus called “God-Spell,” a Broadway musical, that says: “Day by day, oh, dear Lord, three things I pray, To see thee more clearly, Love thee more dearly, Follow thee more nearly, day by day.”

If we can see more clearly, that is, understand better these stories, it is hoped that we may become more passionate about our faith - why we worship together and how we can be better at our ministry to ourselves and to others. I think we become more compassionate people in a world that cries out for it.

The first story is one that Jesus tells to someone who pretends to be interested but really wants to trip Jesus up, either by knowing more or by posing difficult questions. But Jesus uses a technique that the late UH professor of world myths and religions, Joseph Campbell (he married a local woman and they lived near Kahala) called “moral jujitsu.” He tells of a story that poses back to

the negative and tricky of what should that person be, because Jesus brings up the subject of compassion.

Luke 10:25-37

²⁵ Just then a religion scholar stood up with a question to test Jesus. “Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?”

²⁶ He answered, “What’s written in God’s Law? How do you interpret it?”

²⁷ He said, “That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence—and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself.”

²⁸ “Good answer!” said Jesus. “Do it and you’ll live.”

²⁹ Looking for a loophole, he asked, “And just how would you define ‘neighbor’?”

³⁰⁻³² Jesus answered by telling a story. “There was once a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. On the way he was attacked by robbers. They took his clothes, beat him up, and went off leaving him half-dead. Luckily, a priest was on his way down the same road, but when he saw him he angled across to the other side. Then a Levite religious man showed up; he also avoided the injured man.

³³⁻³⁵ “A Samaritan traveling the road came on him. When he saw the man’s condition, his heart went out to him. He gave him first aid, disinfecting and bandaging his wounds. Then he lifted him onto his donkey, led him to an inn, and made him comfortable. In the morning he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take good care of him. If it costs any more, put it on my bill—I’ll pay you on my way back.’

³⁶ “What do you think? Which of the three became a neighbor to the man attacked by robbers?”

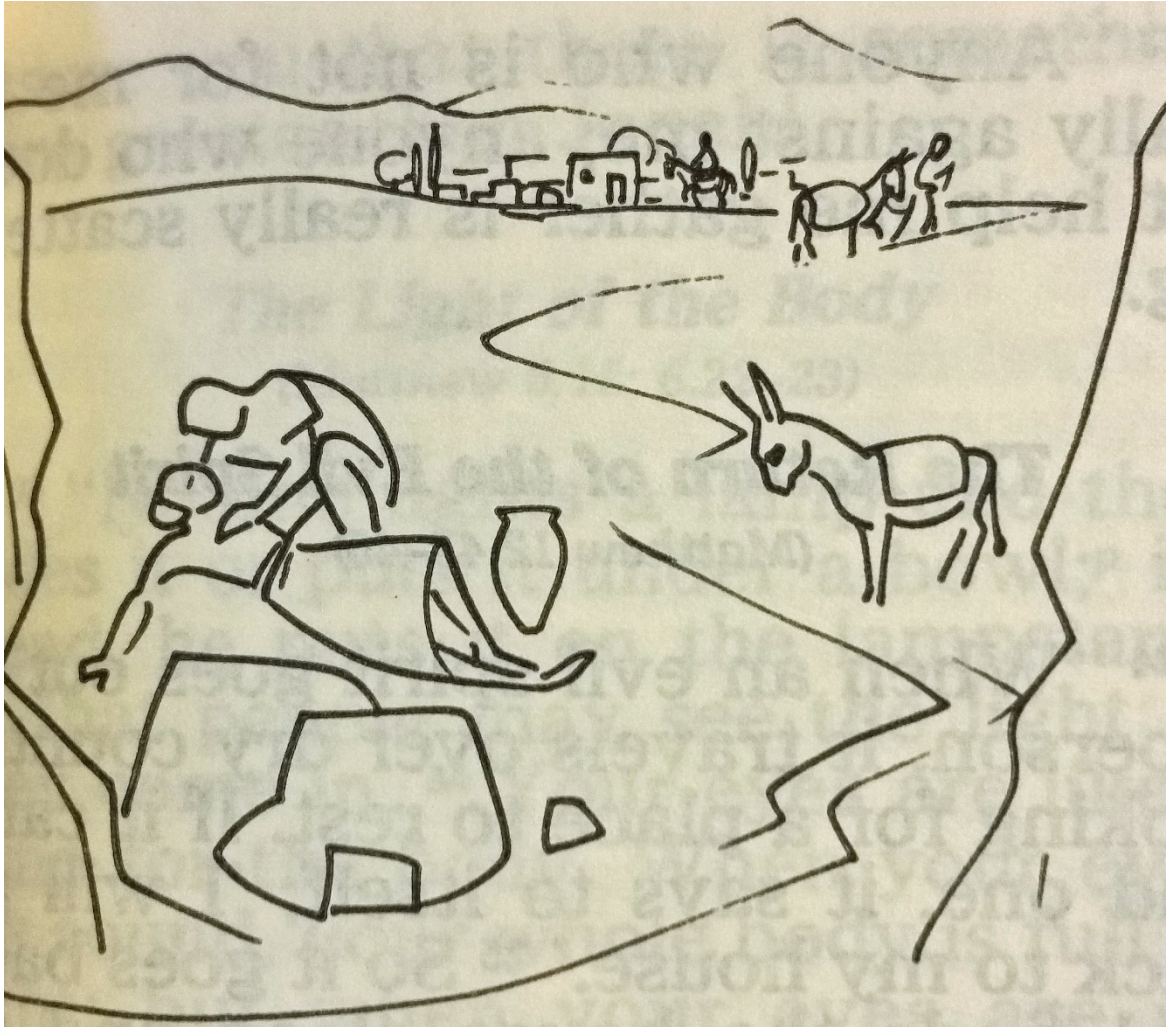
³⁷ “The one who treated him kindly,” the religion scholar responded.

Jesus said, “Go and do the same.”

Okay! Once again in Jesus’ storytelling we aren’t given a lot of details perhaps because we are supposed to know the historical identity of the people. The first two who passed the injured and robbed traveler, who may or may not be a Jew, are persons who are professionals - who live and/or follow certain rules and restrictions. The big rule is that they must remain clean, especially not touching or being in contact with the dead, and in this case a dead body, or at least what looks like a dead body.

The third traveler is a person who is a Samaritan. These guys were not like by Jews because the Samaritans had ransacked the Temple before, they were indigenous and tribal and had their own gods and sacred mountains. As you know, there is another story about a Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus’ friends and followers are taken that he would have spent time talking to her, but

that's another story. In all events they aren't to be liked or trusted. But he is the guy according to Jesus whose heart went out for the injured and robbed fellow traveler.



The Good News Bible, Today's English Version, American Bible Society, "Who are you?"

So now that we have a little more background and detail, I invoke some questions taken from our Church's Native Ministry movement called Gospel Based Discipleship:

What word(s), idea(s), or sentence(s) stand out for you in this Gospel?

Reread the Gospel

What is Jesus saying to you?

Reread the Gospel

What is Jesus calling you to do?

The Second Sunday in Lent

The second Gospel for our Lenten reflection is another well-known reading sometimes referred to as the “prodigal son” or sometimes as the “two sons.” As a parable this is another story of Jesus’ and not an actual event. And there are some cultural details I think we need to know to understand the situation.

This story is very personal to me because I have, in this case, an older brother who left home after graduating from high school and has only returned when he has a “free” trip to the islands. He expressed to me that he doesn’t want to come back here to live ever again. He left my parents and me to care for another brother who was severely handicapped and when that brother died my older brother didn’t return home for his funeral. Over the years I had to be the care provider for my parents while he lived his own life away. My father always kept a place, a condo, for his eventual return that never happened. We sold the condo to use the money to support my father in a care home until he died. My brother did not return for that funeral claiming that he was told not to come.

When my mother (and most of you know of that situation since I began to minister to you) was close to her death she asked for him to come. She would wait so I called and he replied that he had already planned a trip to Southern France for his health and couldn’t or didn’t want to cancel. I told my mother. She was disappointed - a few days later she died. My brother finally came for the funeral. I know people have felt sympathy about this situation and some wonder why I keep in touch with him to this day. My only reply is: he is still my brother.

Now in this Gospel parable it is the younger brother that demands his inheritance to go away. Some commentators understand that as if the younger son was wishing his father to be dead since that should be his after the father’s death.

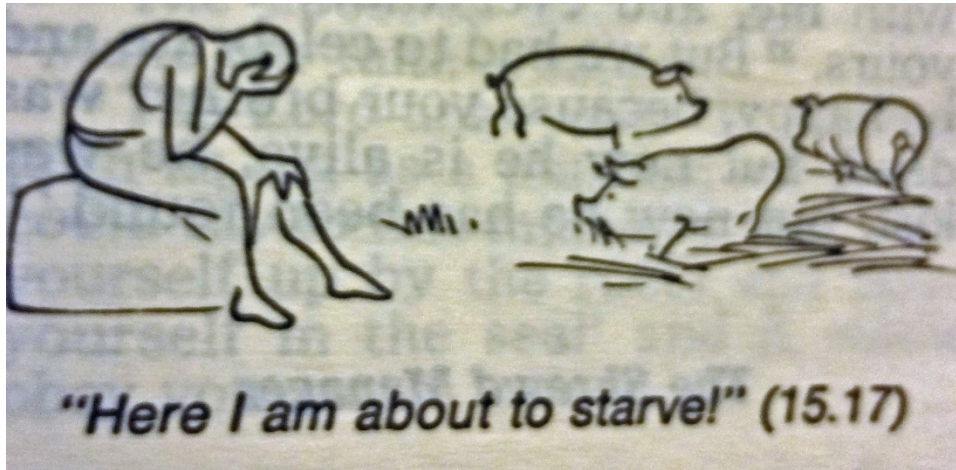
Then there is all this talk about pigs. Those of us who are Chinese and Hawaiian shouldn’t have a problem with this. We both love the color red, eating Chinese food - especially kau yuk and char siu, which is colored red. Pigs are good, but not in the so called Middle East. In fact, we have to wonder who and why there were pigs if Judaism and Islam both abhor pigs and pork (pork is the meat of a dead pig – I learned that from the movie “Babe.”) So, the younger son was so far down the economic ladder after losing his wealth that he had to herd and take care of pigs! And here again we have to assume this is a good and well off Jewish family. Then things get worse because he gets so hungry, perhaps hallucinogenic, that he wants to eat the same food as the pigs do.

In reading and hearing this story, the characters’ assumptions and presumptions and responses are most interesting. Now the Gospel.

Luke 15:11-32

¹¹⁻¹² Then he said, “There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.’”

12-16 “So the father divided the property between them. It wasn’t long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.



The Good News Bible, Today’s English Version, American Bible Society “But this little piggy had roast beef!”

17-20 “That brought him to his senses. He said, ‘All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say to him, Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.’ He got right up and went home to his father.

20-21 “When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: ‘Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son ever again.’

22-24 “But the father wasn’t listening. He was calling to the servants, ‘Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We’re going to feast! We’re going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!’ And they began to have a wonderful time.

25-27 “All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day’s work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, ‘Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast—barbecued beef!—because he has him home safe and sound.’

28-30 “The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn’t listen. The son said, ‘Look how many years I’ve stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me

and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!

³¹⁻³² “His father said, ‘Son, you don’t understand. You’re with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours—but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he’s alive! He was lost, and he’s found!’”

Again I invoke some questions taken from our Church’s Native Ministry movement called Gospel Based Discipleship:

What word(s), idea(s), or sentence(s) stand out for you in this Gospel?

Reread the Gospel

What is Jesus saying to you?

Reread the Gospel

What is Jesus calling you to do?

The Third Sunday in Lent

In the previous Gospels, Jesus seems particular about those who follow to maintain the letter of law such as the first two travelers who did not want to be exposed to a dead body or the farming of pigs and the eating of pork. When I was with the World Council of Churches we had our last meeting in a Muslim country, Morocco, as every other country we tried except Indonesia had some violence occurring. On a tour to visit the King's building of the second largest mosque in the world, I spotted a Chinese restaurant overlooking the ocean. It had a sign in English that they did not serve pork. Chinese food without pork?! Half the menu would be gone.

Anyway, what does all this have to do about the law and rituals and keeping clean? We know that there a Jewish ritual practice of washing and bathing. Remember the wedding in Cana? The immense jars were for the purpose of purification, especially to enter into the Temple. So comes perhaps the phrase 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness' partly hygienic but most religious. How do you feel on a humid and sticky day to take a cool or hot bath? The refreshing feeling afterwards might be similar to what people ritually bathing might feel as Jesus' cousin John did with the idea of totally immersion in the waters of the Jordan River. But in Jesus' time there were many (perhaps too many) restrictions of what could or could not do to maintain that membership to enter the Temple and to be a good religious person.

In this Gospel Jesus is defending his friends and followers to the admonishment of those who think they are better because they uphold and follow the law(s). In this account, for it is an event, Jesus does tell a parable again and like other stories Jesus has to explain its meaning to those with him. I will ask you the same three questions from before, but I add one more here: how does this all add up with the idea of compassion?

Matthew 15 1-20

1-2 After that, Pharisees and religion scholars came to Jesus all the way from Jerusalem, criticizing, "Why do your disciples play fast and loose with the rules?"³⁻⁹ But Jesus put it right back on them. "Why do you use your rules to play fast and loose with God's commands? God clearly says, 'Respect your father and mother,' and, 'Anyone denouncing father or mother should be killed.' But you weasel around that by saying, 'Whoever wants to, can say to father and mother, What I owed to you I've given to God.' That can hardly be called respecting a parent. You cancel God's command by your rules. Frauds! Isaiah's prophecy of you hit the bull's-eye: These people make a big show of saying the right thing, but their heart isn't in it. They act like they're worshipping me, but they don't mean it. They just use me as a cover for teaching whatever suits their fancy."¹⁰⁻¹¹ He then called the crowd together and said, "Listen, and take this to heart. It's not what you swallow that pollutes your life, but what you vomit up."¹² Later his disciples came and told him, "Did you know how upset the Pharisees were when they heard what you said?"¹³⁻¹⁴ Jesus shrugged it off. "Every tree that wasn't planted by my Father in heaven will be pulled up by its roots. Forget them. They are blind men leading blind men. When a blind man leads a blind man, they both end up in the ditch."¹⁵ Peter said, "I don't get it. Put it in plain language."¹⁶⁻²⁰ Jesus replied, "You, too? Are you being willfully stupid? Don't you know that anything that is swallowed works its way through the intestines and is finally defecated? But what comes out of the mouth gets its start in the heart. It's from the heart that we vomit up evil

arguments, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, lies, and cussing. That's what pollutes. Eating or not eating certain foods, washing or not washing your hands—that's neither here nor there."

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The Fourth Sunday in Lent

This is the last Gospel story to reflect on as we prepare ourselves for Holy Week and the Passiontide of Easter. There are five Sundays and we can take a rest to consider all that we have done this season of Lent.

This short teaching was part of the longer “sermon” on the Mount when Jesus spoke on many subjects from prayer to happiness to divorce. It is commented at the end of the chapter, “When Jesus finished saying these things, the crowd was amazed at the way he taught. He wasn’t like the teachers of the Law; instead he taught with authority.”

Following up on one’s “religious” duties Jesus speaks about what comes from the heart but is it a show or is it authentic? It is a question that people ask of themselves during the Lenten season and can be found in the petitions said during the Great Litany:

Remember not, Lord Christ, our offenses, nor the offenses of our forefathers; neither reward us according to our sins. Spare us, good Lord, spare thy people, whom thou hast redeemed with thy most precious blood, and by thy mercy preserve us, forever.
Spare us, good Lord.

From all evil and wickedness; from sin; from the crafts and assaults of the devil; and from everlasting damnation,
Good Lord, deliver us.

From all blindness of heart; from pride, vainglory, and hypocrisy; from envy, hatred, and malice; and from all want of charity,
Good Lord, deliver us.

From all inordinate and sinful affections; and from all the deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil,
Good Lord, deliver us.

From all false doctrine, heresy, and schism; from hardness of heart, and contempt of thy Word and commandment,
Good Lord, deliver us.

Do you remember the story of the vent when Jesus is at the home of Martha (Luke 10:38-42) :

³⁸ As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. ³⁹ She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be

made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

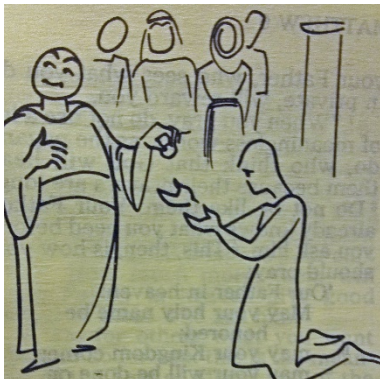
⁴¹ “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴² but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

Jesus has to remind Martha that her complaints are duly noted but that her sister Mary in her action and silence that instruction from Jesus who is not going to be there too long is also a vocation and in this case really, really important, so much so that “it will not be taken away from her.”

As the Passiontide, the suffering of Jesus, his violent persecution and murder approaches, how prepared are you and I to accept it, as he constantly reminded us would come? Are we prepared to continue that walk, the journey without him along the road to Emmaus? Do we see the light from being blind, not physically but spiritually that we can tell the person we are travelling with might be him?

Matthew 6: 1-4

1 “Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don’t make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won’t be applauding.
2-4 “When you do something for someone else, don’t call attention to yourself. You’ve seen them in action, I’m sure— ‘play-actors’ I call them—treating prayer meeting and street corner alike as a stage, acting compassionate as long as someone is watching, playing to the crowds. They get applause, true, but that’s all they get. When you help someone out, don’t think about how it looks. Just do it—quietly and unobtrusively. That is the way your God, who conceived you in love, working behind the scenes, helps you out.



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