



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

The Sages Are Right: You Do Get More Than You Give
A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.
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The first communion hymn we will sing later in this liturgy is perhaps the signature hymn of Christianity, “Amazing Grace.” There is a line in that hymn that sings, “I once was lost but now I’m found, was blind, but now I see.” All of us know intuitively that that hymn is not about the restoration of the lyricist’s physical sight. It is about the restoration of his moral, spiritual, and religious vision. We know from history that the hymn was written by John Newton who had commanded an English slave ship in the 18th century slave trade.

Ships would make the first leg of their voyage from England nearly empty until they would anchor off the African coast. Tribal chiefs would deliver to the Europeans stockades full of men and women and children captured in raids and wars against other tribes. Buyers would go and look at these human beings, selecting who they considered to be the finest specimens. Then they would barter for them with weapons and ammunition and metal and liquor and trinkets and cloth – one of the most shameful moments in the history of commodifying human beings. Then the captives would be loaded aboard and packed for sailing. They were chained below decks to prevent suicides, laid side-by-side like cord wood in order to save space—row after row, one after another until the vessel was laden with as many as six-hundred units of human cargo. This was the moral blindness from which John Newton was healed.

After he received his moral and political vision, John Newton, who was now an Anglican priest, joined the abolitionist movement and helped bring an end to slavery. Along with the entire abolitionist movement Newton worked against the odds. In that time some university economists were convinced that if the abolitionists succeeded that their societies would not survive economically. (Shades of the argument we hear today against all sorts of issues in human rights progress including universal health care coverage.) About the slavery business, some economists wrote papers logically demonstrating that slavery was essential, and that these human rights violations were economically required.

This bit of history of the healing of the blindness about slavery brings to my mind the current practice of organized religion in certain parts of Christianity, including the Pope’s recent welcoming of certain Anglican persons and congregations into Rome saying that Christianity cannot survive if women and gay people are ordained to the priesthood and episcopacy and if gay people have marriage equality.

Karen Armstrong in her new book (my newest favorite book), *A Case For God*, shows how religion at its best has always been at its heart a summons to practice compassion with an emphasis on practicing it not just believing it. Giving compassion to others, just not intellectually assenting to its importance. The heart of religion is to make tangible The Golden Rule first articulated by Confucius but later re-emphasized by Judaism and later by Jesus – “Do not do to others what you would not want done unto you.” Or in Jesus’s version. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

There is a famous story about the great rabbi, Hillel, the older contemporary of Jesus. A pagan came to him one day and offered to convert to Judaism if the rabbi could recite the whole Jewish teaching while he stood on one leg. Hillel stood on one leg and said, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and study it." [laughter]

And "go and study it" was what he meant. He said, "In your exegesis (seminary talk for bible study) you must make it clear that every single verse of the Torah is a commentary on the "Golden Rule." Another great rabbi, Rabbi Meir, said that any interpretation of scripture which led to hatred, any interpretation of scripture which led to disdain or contempt of other people—any people whatsoever—that that interpretation was illegitimate.

Saint Augustine made exactly the same point. Scripture, he says, "teaches nothing but charity, and we must not leave an interpretation of scripture until we have found a compassionate interpretation of it." (The story above and the paragraphs following are taken from Karen Armstrong’s TED lecture given Feb., 2008. The TED Prize was introduced in 2005. Each year, three individuals are each given \$100,000 and granted a "wish to change the world", which they unveil at TED. Professor Armstrong’s wish has since developed into the growingly popular Charter of Compassion.)

Professor Armstrong says there is a massive problem with contemporary religion. She said, “There is a great deal, I think, of religious illiteracy around. People now seem to equate religious faith with believing things. As though that—after all we call religious people often believers, as if believing things were the main thing that people of faith do. And very often, secondary goals get pushed into the first place, in place of compassion and the Golden Rule. “That’s because” she argues, “the Golden Rule is difficult. I sometimes, when I’m speaking to congregations about compassion, I sometimes see a mutinous expression crossing some of their faces because a lot of religious people prefer to be right, rather than compassionate.” TED lecture

The heart of Christianity and the heart of other global religions and the heart of having our moral and spiritual vision restored is not about getting the ideas right or the beliefs right. The heart of the matter is extending compassion to all people – particularly to those who have done you wrong. Jesus made this point very clear and very sharp when he said, “Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.” Elsewhere he says, “Go and learn what this means when God says through the prophets, ‘I desire compassion and not sacrifice.’” For Jesus the summary of all the Torah was to love God with all your being and to love your neighbor as you love yourself.

According to Jesus the deepest spiritual practice, the most transformative spiritual practice, the most enlightened and enlightening spiritual practice is not fasting, is not praying, is not going on retreats, is not journaling, and is not having a spiritual director. That doesn't mean that fasting, praying, going on retreats, journaling, and having a spiritual director are not crucial for us at important points in our day or in our life. Jesus certainly seems to have spent enormous quantities of time alone, praying and fasting. But Jesus was clear: the central spiritual practice is compassion, giving compassion, practicing compassion—not just saying that you believe compassion is a good thing.

Right after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE (the Common Era) two rabbis walked past the ruined Temple buildings, the place we now call the Western Wall in Jerusalem and one rabbi named Rabbi Joshua had been unable to contain his grief, he was so grief-stricken about the destruction of the temple he said, “Woe is it that the place, where the sins of Israel find atonement, is laid waste.” (referring to the holy of holies where God's very Spirit was believed to reside.) But Rabbi Yohanan his interlocutor, replied calmly, “Grieve not, we have an atonement equal to the Temple, and that atonement is the doing of loving deeds.” (Karen Armstrong, *A Case for God*, p. 79)

The very *Shekinah*, the Hebrew word for the Presence of God, is in every human being. When one gives compassion to another person one has loved the Divine Presence in all creatures. The hatred of any human being made in God's image and in whom the divine Presence dwells – that hatred is tantamount to atheism. Ibid, p. 80

I rush to say that compassion is not an easy spiritual exercise to practice much less to master. It is the hardest of all the spiritual exercises. However, *compassion is the essence of enlightenment, the essence of reversing one's moral blindness*. Compassion is the heart of a new vision. Compassion is that power that can bring sight to (that phrase I loved in our entrance hymn) “to the inly blind.”

Many people say, “I have no patience,” or “I don't have what it takes to forgive,” or “I can't have compassion.” All of these are our choices, of course. And all of them stem from a certain thinking that comes from having a scarcity mentality.

Jesus directly addressed this business about giving compassion or giving forgiveness or giving anything and as a result, receiving more than you gave. Eckhart Tolle explains Jesus's words in the following way. He picks out a particular passage of Jesus's about giving and spends some time describing it:

“If the thought of lack – whether it be money, recognition, or love, or compassion – if that part of lack has become part of who you think you are, you will always experience lack. Rather than acknowledge the good that is already in your life, all you see is lack. Acknowledging the good that is already in your life is the foundation of all abundance. The fact is: Whatever you think the world is withholding from you, you actually are withholding from the world. You are withholding it because deep down you think you are small and that you have nothing to give.”

He then counsels, “Try this for a couple of weeks and see how it changes your reality: Whatever you think people are withholding from you – praise, appreciation, assistance, loving care, compassion, and so on – give it to them. You don’t have it? Just act as if you had it, and it will come. Then, soon after you start giving, you will start receiving. You cannot receive what you don’t give. Outflow determines inflow. Whatever you think the world is withholding from you, you already have, but unless you allow it to flow out, you won’t even know that you have it. It’s the act of letting it flow out that you feel it. This includes abundance. The law that outflow determines inflow is expressed by Jesus in this powerful image (and here’s the quotation that stimulated his thinking). Jesus said, ‘Give and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap.’ (Luke 6:38)

“The source of all abundance is not outside you. The source of all abundance is part of who you are. However, start by acknowledging and recognizing abundance without and see the fullness of life all around you. The warmth of the sun on your skin, the display of magnificent flowers outside a florist’s shop, biting into a succulent fruit, or getting soaked in an abundance of water falling from the sky. [If he had been here this morning he would have said, ‘Looking into the eyes of the children in the children’s choir at All Saints Church.’] The fullness of life is there at every step. The acknowledgement of that abundance that is all around you awakens the dormant abundance within. Then let it flow out. When you smile at a stranger, there is already a minute outflow of energy. In that moment, smiling at a stranger, you become a giver. Ask yourself often: ‘What can I give here; how can I be of service to this person, how can I be of service in this situation, how can I be an instrument of compassion in this moment?’ You don’t need to own anything to feel abundant, although if you feel abundant consistently things will almost always certainly come to you. Both abundance and scarcity are inner states that manifest as your outer reality.” (Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth*, pp. 191-192)

Interestingly enough, this passage in the best-selling book *A New Earth*, is in the chapter Tolle names, “Finding Who You Truly Are.”

I am convinced that when you and I practice this kind of giving, we do discover who we truly are. We are Abundant Givers. You and I always live with the Divine Presence within us. However, we can live totally blind to the Divine Presence living within us and the Divine Presence living in every other person. We can be as blind as John Newton was when he was a part of the international slave trade. On the other hand, we can have our vision restored when we give what it is that we want. When we give friendship, when we give compassion, when we give forgiveness, when we give patience, when we give someone a second, third, fourth and fifth chance until seventy times seven is given, when we give our money to God and to God’s compassionate ways, we become abundant. Outflow determines inflow.

The sages are right. We do get more than we give. *It is* in giving that we receive.

Amen.