

RENEW LENT - FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

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Breaking Open Compassion: Reflections on Mercy, and Repentance

By Bernadette Kutarna

In the late 1990's I was a co-facilitator with the Regina-based Reel Anti-Suppressants Popular Theatre Group, an amazing group of women and men who lived with mental health diagnoses. The group was formed a few years earlier when a request came in from the Regina Public Library to do a presentation to staff about mental health. One person, who became one of the first troupe members, suggested we do skits and songs rather than a dry talk. The presentation was deemed the highlight of the staff workshops!

With the help of a person who also became a troupe member, we obtained a grant from PLURA (then, Prebysterian, Lutheran, United, Roman Catholic, Anglican) for travel and applied to the Canadian Association of Music Therapists Conference committee to do a workshop. We fund-raised vigorously, then travelled to Montreal to present workshops at two separate professional and mental health conferences! Each troupe member was given a per diem and payment for each workshop.

The workshop was in the form of a performance using humourous skits and heart-wrenching songs to highlight how ridiculous the 'isms' we place on people are – people who are poorly housed, have limited access to nutritious food, are too cold in winter and too hot in summer in their substandard housing, out on the street or in shelters, people who are subjected to racism, economic exploitation, physical, mental and psychological harm, ageism, sexism, and systemic exclusion. The performances highlighted how people's selfishness harms people. The workshops were well received!

What happened following the workshops took place on the Metro. In a most thought-provoking 'ah hah' experience for me, a fellow approached us asking for money. I kept walking, but not the troupe! They stopped, gave him money, 'tailor-mades' out of their per diem, and chatted. The fellow was so delighted he came with us to our metro stop, playing his harmonica, dancing, and chatting with the troupe.

My understanding of this First Sunday in Lent gospel (Mark 1:12-15) broke open! What is the good news for which we need to repent, change direction, hear, and live? The good news is that God's covenant with all people includes God's mercy and compassion for everyone on this earth, with no exception. Even in our ludicrous moments when we decide to judge harshly, when we passively agree to let people starve or be poorly housed, or when we agree by our inaction to let creation be harmed, God's mercy and compassion surround us and the ones we treat harshly.



That is where the call to repentance comes in: when we are guided by someone we self-righteously do not regard as worthy of our attention but who lives mercy and compassion for another, as did the troupe members. It is an eye, ear, and heart opener to see that God is in and surrounding all of creation.

God does **not** say, 'Oh, you are a woman, so you are less than a man,' or 'You have a mental illness, so you are not worthy.' God does not say, 'Oh, you stole or killed'; therefore, you are not worthy of my love. God's mercy and compassion is freely given to **all**. God's Son, Jesus Christ, lived on this earth speaking with everyone, including the people the leaders of the day thought unworthy. Jesus' life is a tremendous example of how to live in a righteous way that is compassionate and merciful to everyone.

Stereotypes and 'isms' placed on vulnerable people are harmful because our judgements, actions, and inactions massively hide our own need for repentance, a change of attitude, a change of heart - a change to compassion and mercy, as Jesus lived.

The troupe immediately enjoyed the goodness in the man who asked them for money. The troupe's loving, merciful and compassionate action exposed my stereotypes for being glaringly wrong. I needed to question my judgement and my inaction. I needed to repent, to change inaction to active compassion and mercy. Repentance includes taking a different direction. Rather than walking past, have a conversation. Moving forward, I can remember that each of us is created equally by God. I can work to create a world where all people are treated with mercy and compassion. I can question my judgements of others, remembering the mercy and compassion Jesus had for everyone he encountered.

God's covenant is with all God's people (Genesis 9:8-15). No one is excluded. No part of creation is excluded. Can we live our part of the covenant with God to become merciful and compassionate with every person and with all of God's amazingly vibrant creation?

For Your Reflection:

- Reflect on moments in your life where repentance led to positive change.
- How can the example of Jesus inspire more compassionate actions in your daily life?
- What steps can you take to combat stereotypes and judgments towards others?
- How can you translate lessons learned into concrete actions for building a more inclusive and compassionate community?

Heavenly Father,

Open our hearts to see the humanity in all those we encounter. Help us to break down the barriers of judgment and stereotypes, and guide us towards acts of mercy and compassion. Teach us to follow the example of Jesus, who showed boundless love to all, regardless of societal labels. May we be instruments of your peace and agents of your unconditional love in our communities and beyond. Amen.