

January Theme

Mercy: The Practice of Compassion

We start the New Year with our continued practice at Unitarian Universalist Area Church of offering a monthly theme or topic for reflection. We invite you to consider these monthly themes personally, in small group discussions and in worship together. In a world that seems to divide us, intentional reflection can be a way of developing faith in yourself, your community and your beliefs.

The theme for January is: Mercy, the Practice of Compassion. Etymology teaches us that original meanings of the word, mercy, include: trade, wares, reward and bribe. Its continued use in early religious context suggest that mercy was something to be earned or granted by the church. The French meaning of *Merci* is “thanks.” Modern English definition of mercy is “compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.”

Compassion has its roots in Latin meaning “with” and “suffering.” Modern definitions of compassion include: “Deep awareness of the suffering of another accompanied by the wish to relieve it.” While both words, mercy and compassion, connote an action of good will toward another, compassion seems to connect with the other more directly by requiring empathy.

Our seven Unitarian Universalist principles draw from many sources and encourage us to honor and connect ourselves and others in a world that seems to divide us. While our beliefs and backgrounds as UUs are varied, we are united by these seven, interconnected principles that affirm and promote our shared values. As we explore our theme this month, Our second principle “Justice, equity and compassion in human relations” comes to mind. We can recognize how strongly it is connected to the first principle “Inherent worth and dignity of every person”.

In recent months, we have heard about and experienced divisiveness, cold-hearted words and actions that include “us” and “them” more than “we.” It can feel like an insurmountable challenge to find it in our hearts to connect, empathically, toward those we perceive to be very different. If we let go of the fear and ignorance that prevents us from knowing others, we may be able to walk together on our journey. Opening our hearts and minds might just allow us to experience how much more alike than we are than different.

In Christianity, Islam, Buddhist and Hindu faith traditions, compassion is central to teachings. Compassion is not only valued in spiritual communities. We are beginning to learn more about the brain and compassion through scientific discovery. There exists significant neurological research that shows what compassion looks like in the brain. Research shows connection between compassion and healing and suggests that we can cultivate compassion through meditative exercises.

Worship associates offer some further quotes and questions we hope may be helpful in guiding your discussion on Mercy and Compassion with meaning and inspiration.

This month's theme was composed by Jane Detwiler and Jennifer Ollington and the Worship Associates.

Questions

1. What would it look like to show mercy to the person who has hurt you the most?
2. What was a time when someone showed compassion towards you?
3. How can you be merciful to yourself?
4. How can we show mercy as a community?
5. What are the benefits, for you and for your community, of being merciful?
6. How are mercy and forgiveness different and/or the same?
7. When have you needed mercy and/or asked for mercy?
8. When is it acceptable to withhold mercy?
9. What has been the most merciful think that you have ever experienced?
10. Can there be mercy without compassion?

Quotes:

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”
--Jesus of Nazareth, *Matthew 5:7*

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.
-- William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

“People are more than the worst thing they have ever done in their lives.”
— Sister Helen Prejean

“Mercy is just when it is rooted in hopefulness and freely given. Mercy is most empowering, liberating, and transformative when it is directed at the undeserving. The people who haven't earned it, who haven't even sought it, are the most meaningful recipients of our compassion.”
— Bryan Stevenson

"We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy and we condemn ourselves as much as we victimize others. The closer we get to mass incarceration and extreme levels of punishment, the more I believe it's necessary to recognize that we all need mercy, we all need justice, and-perhaps-we all need some measure of unmerited grace."
— Bryan Stevenson

The Worship Associates are: Carly Baker, Alexandra Businger, Alan Cantor, Jane Detwiler, Margaret Homer, Maria Kempner, Julien Lafleur, Megan Momtaheni, Jennifer Ollington, Nevin Shanabrook, and Gary Strichartz.