

RADICAL COMPASSION

Christmas, 2015

by Jane Cocke Perdue

*Refugees search black skies
for sights of hope
dreaming of silent nights.*

*Instead...
Planes slash the air
with noises of war.
Children cry helplessly
in the dark
without a guiding star.*

*Far away we frame
our caves of comfort
with blinking lights
and tinkling bells—
lavish love reminders
overshadowing thoughts
of wars' devastations.*



*While millions suffer deprivation
and displacement,
we mourn*

*the elimination
of a snowflake
from a Starbuck's cup.*

*Instead...
May our hands
this Season hold
cups of compassion
and the java of justice
jolting us nearer
to the hope of Peace
and the joy of Love
Revealed by a newborn
In a stable long ago.*

Scripture:

Isaiah 12:2-6

²Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

³With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. ⁴And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.

⁵Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. ⁶Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Luke 3:7-16

⁷John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

This is the word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



RADICAL COMPASSION

When I was in seminary, I never in my wildest dreams thought I would mention “the Donald” in a sermon. But my job is to apply the scripture message to today’s culture, which Trump is negatively influencing.

Our Stated Clerk of the PCUSA General Assembly, Rev. Gradye Parsons, has written a letter to Donald addressing his statements about refugees and immigrants, since he claimed to be a Presbyterian. Here is an excerpt from the letter written to Trump about his stance on immigration:

“Presbyterians profess a faith in Jesus Christ, whose parents were forced to flee with him to Egypt when he was an infant to save him from King Herod. Knowing our Lord was once a refugee, faithful Presbyterians have been writing church policy urging the welcome of refugees and demanding higher annual admissions into the United States since the refugee crisis of World War II. Presbyterians have a mission presence in many refugee-sending countries, including Syria and Lebanon, where we have been present since 1823. Our relationship with people of faith and communities in these countries gives us knowledge of the root causes of the flight of refugees and further cements a commitment to welcome them.

“Presbyterians through decades of policy have demanded humane treatment of people of all nationalities and faiths who find themselves within our borders. We have challenged our government when it neglects to acknowledge the refugee status of those fleeing persecution. We have pushed for due process at the border and we continue to petition for immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship for undocumented persons.”

Our stated clerk, Reverend Gradye Parsons closes the letter with: “As a Presbyterian I acknowledge my immigrant ancestors and my

new immigrant sisters and brothers. I also respect that we came uninvited to a land already occupied by people. This creates a sense of humility about my citizenship that shapes my views on those who seek a place here.”

JOHN THE BAPTIST

John, in our passage today, was teaching the people to be humble and to not assume that they had higher status because they were Jews descended from Abraham. John the Baptist was reminding them that their top priority was being concerned for the welfare of others, all others.

This speech by John the Baptist is almost a polar opposite message from what Donald Trump is saying these days. He has been speaking arrogantly, and inciting fear and anxiety towards all Muslims.

John the Baptist was boldly inspiring humility, repentance, and radical compassion towards the stranger or whoever the “other” may be in our midst and around the world.

John was paving the way for his cousin, Jesus, to come with an even more strategic plan for showing love to all.

This message today from John the Baptist is a preamble to Christ’s ministry. John preached that we should give our other coat and food to anyone, no pre-requisites. I am proud to say that this is how we run our free breakfast program during the week. We don’t stop the kids at the door and make them prove they are Presbyterian, or economically in need. All can eat our free breakfast with no proof of citizenship or even a student ID. That is because we are showing God’s Love as John instructed. We give food and friendship to “anyone.”

Unity in diversity is God’s goal for us

John the Baptist was known for his plain talk and clear message. He didn't mess around! Either you share God's love, multiply it, and reap the harvest of good fruit from that love, or you may not get another chance. We never know how many chances we are going to get in life to make things right with friends, family, and neighbors.

THE REV. DR. MICHAEL BROWN

The Rev. Dr. Michael Brown, senior minister of Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, tells this story: Some years ago a successful businessman was in a bed in Cardiac Intensive Care Unit in a major hospital in New York City. He had just undergone radical and experimental surgery designed to save his life.

As he lay in ICU, he was in crisis. There were serious post-surgical complications. Later he reported about that night when he lay awake, fearing that his life was about to end, and reflecting on what it had and had not been, reflecting on all the things he had gotten any way he could and all the things he had lost, all the pain he had suffered and all the pain he had unfairly inflicted upon others.

He said he lay there asking himself, amid all his accomplishments and acquisitions, what had been the one thing in his life he had always sought but could never find? His answer was: "The one thing I was never able to obtain was peace."

The next morning, a chaplain visited his room, making rounds from patient to patient. She only stayed a few moments, chatting lightly to see if he needed any religious inspiration. Prior to leaving she said, "Let me read a brief passage from the Bible to you, and then we will say a prayer." The chaplain read the words from Christ: "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give unto you. Not as the world gives, do I give to you."

The patient said, "The words struck me like a spiritual hammer. That chaplain did not know me. But there was no way her visit could have been a mere coincidence. Without even knowing that she did so, she showed me how to find what I had needed and could not obtain all my life.

**The man said, I suddenly got it; if I could find Jesus, if I could really get to know him, I would find peace."
(And he did.)**

Dr. Brown says, "There are those who say that this story's formula is too easy and the story is too personal, that it doesn't address the chaos currently affecting the global masses. But, as Christians, we trust the path to public peace begins with the individual, with a Prince of Peace, who takes our hearts one at a time and guides us toward our neighbors.

By sharing peace with one another, somehow things begin to change. Like the song "*Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.*"

FEAR MONGERING

Donald Trump is using an anti-peace method to gain attention: fear mongering. Hitler, Stalin, Lenin, Castro, Chairman Mao, all the notorious dictators in our history have used fear to divide people from one another, to make them suspicious and competitive towards one another, and to create a "we versus they" mentality.

Jesus promoted the opposite. He called us all "one" and he inspired Paul to say that there is no longer Jew nor Greek, no longer slave nor free, male nor female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 1:10 says, God has a plan for unifying the peoples of the earth – "As a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

And in the meantime Romans 12:16 instructs us to: "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight."

COMPASSION

Compassion is defined as a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering.

Radical Compassion means more than being peaceful, not gossiping, and being non-judgmental of others. It means having an empathic understanding of what others are experiencing, how they are suffering through each day, and letting your heart be broken over

the unfair, unjust circumstances of the least of these near and far.

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

The organization, Human Rights Watch has a daily brief on how people are living and struggling around the globe. Their executive director, Kenneth Roth, a graduate of both Yale and Brown University with experience as a federal prosecutor, warns us about the United States' response to the refugee crisis.

In an article titled: *The Fear-Monger's Bad Advice* he said, "The focus on refugees in the aftermath of the recent attacks is a dangerous distraction from Europe's violent home-grown extremism. The roots of the problem are notoriously complex but relate in part to the social exclusion of past generations of immigrants — the persistent discrimination, hopelessness, and despair that pervades neighborhoods on the outskirts of certain cities."

Roth goes on to explain that a major part of today's public discussion should be about how to remedy this situation through compassion and diplomacy. He said, "These serious social injustices (discrimination, and alienation) should be a major part of today's public debate, rather than the polarizing us-versus-them rhetoric."

Roth concludes by warning that "Discarding basic rights or scapegoating people of a certain religious profile does not only harm those directly implicated, it allows terrorist groups to generate more recruits. The smart counter-terrorism policy is the rights-respecting one."

JESUS WAS A REFUGEE

And Jesus would add that compassion is a counter-terrorism policy as well. Compassion for the victims, but also for the youth who feel they have no other group but ISIS to turn to for a sense of belonging.

Jesus was a refugee when King Herod was bent on killing all the male children two years old and younger in Bethlehem. Joseph was told in a dream to pick up Mary and the baby and flee to Egypt until it was safe to return home. Thank God, Egypt let them in!

The Assad regime in Syria and the ISIS nation in Iraq are murderous thugs like King Herod. Now is the time to remember that Jesus

showed us how to be empathic to those who are displaced by starting out his holy life as a displaced infant himself. By not taking in the refugee children we are making them prime recruits for ISIS and any other extreme group that will take them in and turn them into child soldiers to accomplish their murderous plans. (A video showing how vulnerable the children are was shown to the congregation.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dG8qrqCDOmU>

This Advent, let us not be a brood of vipers but the ones who listen to John and plant trees that yield the fruit of compassion for all. Amen

Benediction:

May God, who has begun a good work within you, continue that work until the day when Christ Jesus returns.

May your love and compassion overflow and may you continue to grow in knowledge and understanding, so that you can clearly discern what really matters in this life - spreading God's peace.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forevermore. Amen



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