

**Cultivating Compassion:  
Self-Compassion & the Love of God and Neighbour  
Sermon – April 12, 2026**

Good morning. Christ is Risen! Sometimes we only say this once per year and while perhaps that makes it a special phrase, in some ways it also can trick us into thinking that the importance of Christ's resurrection is a one-day-per-year thing, where in reality it is an all-the-time thing as Christians. We walk forward in the power of the risen Christ to live lives transformed by the hope we have in the God of resurrection, the God of new life. New life: this is something that I think we can all get excited about or at least hope for at this time of year. Spring is truly taking off, even if we get hints of winter still, and new life has begun to peek up out of the cold ground, ready to grow and blossom. What new life are you hoping will emerge like this in our own lives this time of year too, as well as in the life of our community and world.

I really like the way that, as creatures of this earth, the metaphors and images that we draw upon to describe our lives show our interconnections with creation. Like dormant plants waiting out the cold of winter, we too can go through seasons of dormancy in our lives, in our relationships with God and others. Like cold, frozen soil waiting for the warmer temperatures and rays of sunshine along with spring rains to soften and hydrate the ground, so too can we, like frozen soil,

long for a new, inner-warmth to come over us, preparing us, whether we are young or old, for new growth in whatever season of life we find ourselves in.

Jesus often employed natural images in his teaching and it's no surprise why – after all, he preached an awful lot to rural communities for whom various forms of farming and planting were absolute necessities of daily life. And so, for example, when Jesus wanted to teach his followers about God's work in us, shaping us into people of the Kingdom of God, he turned to natural images like seed planting, types of soil, vineyard stewardship, shepherding, planting mustard seeds, threshing and winnowing wheat, and collecting bountiful harvests. These images are powerful because they show how the conditions for growth or conversely lack of growth, are not unlike the conditions that are at work in us as people made in the image of God. To take one example: we, like soil, need cultivation – need “tilling” up and tending, we need frequent care so that we might receive the Word of God's teaching and be changed into Kingdom people, people that embody the love of God through word and deed.

“Cultivation” is a key word that this worship series will focus on to help us explore different “virtues” or maybe we could call them “seeds” or “cuttings” that God plants in us and cultivates with the hope that growth would occur. Our theme verse for this series comes from Colossians chapter 3:12-15 [read]. While the metaphor here is one of clothing, of “putting on” these virtues, I think it is helpful

as well to see these virtues not just as things that we can, at will, embody perfectly, but also as new growth that have to be cultivated in us so that we might, like the lilies of the field, be clothed by God (Matt. 6:28-29). Lillies, incidentally, are also seen to represent virtues and so there is a nice connection there too. A key learning here, though, is that the cultivation is not first and foremost our work, but God's – we are asked to be receptive to the cultivation of God and participate in the growing, even if the tilling and the tending sometimes disturbs parts of us that we'd rather have left alone.

Here, though, we might wonder, “what is the point of cultivating these virtues?” “What are they for?” Well, one thing is for sure: given that we live together in this interconnected world—we are bundled together in a wide web of relationships with God, each other, and creation— and God cultivates these virtues in us for the well-being of the whole; for the health of all our relationships, for the accomplishment of what the bible calls God's *Shalom*: peace, well-being, fulfillment. In a world where conflict and relational breakdown is all too common on all levels, may God guide us through this worship series into a better way and empower us to walk in it as we are receptive to the cultivation of virtues in us like compassion, mercy, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and gratitude.

Today, we begin our journey by considering how God might cultivate the soil of our hearts so as to be receptive to the seed and growth of **compassion** in us.

Compassion is a word whose meaning perhaps seems obvious to us, but in the bible, there are a variety of words that are translated as compassion and they often carry a particular emphasis on being moved by a deep inner feeling, affection, and love. Maybe some of you have heard older Bible translations like the KJV that talk of the “bowels of compassion,” and there the emphasis is on demonstrating how deeply one feels something when they have compassion: you feel it in the “gut,” the seat of emotions in the bible.

A couple of biblical examples might help us see this: [slide 4]

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**Compassion flows from the love of God deep within us** – But whoso hath the world's goods, and beholdeth his brother in need, and shutteth up his compassion [lit. bowels] from him, how doth the love of God abide in him? (1 John 3:17, ASV)

**Jesus showed compassion** – I have compassion on the multitude, because they continue with me now three days and have nothing to eat (Matthew 15:32, NRSV)

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There are so many relationships in which compassion can be cultivated. Consider several relationships where compassion is important to cultivate: [list on slide]

- Family (broadly)
- Friendship
- Community
- Church family
- Spouse/Partner
- Boss/Co-worker
- Caregiver

These are all significant relationships in which it is important to cultivate compassion, and we could spend the rest of this morning looking at examples of some of these relationships and how compassion is important for their health and well-being. Today, however, I want to consider one perhaps slightly less-talked-about application of compassion and that is *self-compassion*. What is self-compassion: [SLIDE].

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### Compassionately attending to the self

According to one researcher, self-compassion:

“...refers to being supportive toward oneself when experiencing suffering or pain-be it caused by personal mistakes and inadequacies or external life challenges.” (Kristin D. Neff, *Self-Compassion: Theory, Method, Research, and Intervention*, in “Annual Review of Psychology,” Aug 2022)

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The problem, however, is that we often don’t compassionately attend to ourselves.

I was struck, as I did a little bit of researching about self-compassion, by the verse

in Luke 10 where a Lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life and

Jesus responds by asking what is written in the law – “love God with all your heart,

soul, and strength, mind, and love your neighbour.” That was it, right? Oh, what

did I miss – “as yourself.” Have you thought about this often? What does it mean

to “love” yourself and how might that help you love your neighbour? Or, taking

our previous definition of compassion which was described as a deep inner feeling

or love, what might it mean to show yourself compassion and how might that help

you show your neighbour compassion?

As I thought about this, I was reminded of this wonderful book by Betty Pries called *The Space Between Us: Conversations about Transforming Conflict*.<sup>1</sup> A key conviction of hers is that much of the conflict that we find ourselves in throughout our lives stems from relating to others not from our deeper, beloved self where God’s compassion resides, but instead from a defended self that we’ve constructed – a layer of our identity that has accumulated over time to hide our vulnerabilities and fears. Pries “maps” the self in terms of three layers, the “Descriptive” self, the defended self, and the deeper self and if you come to worship response time we can talk more about these there. But the key takeaway from her analysis is that we often relate to each other from the layer of our “defended self,” and so our relationships become unhealthy. When this “defended self” clashes with the defended self of others, it leads to problems and until one or both of the people in the relationship are willing to attend to themselves and ask about their own feelings and the hidden attachments and motivations that animate them. Pries notes:

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“Without self-compassion, it is also difficult to be compassionate to others. When we meet people who are very judgmental, it is likely that they have spent a significant portion of their life journey being judgmental of themselves. In the vast majority of the conflicts we experience, each person connected to the conflict has played a part in the conflict’s unfolding. A hard and honest look at ourselves is critical for learning and healing from the conflict. But a hard and honest look at ourselves is also painful. Self-

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<sup>1</sup> Betty Pries, *The Space Between Us: Conversations about transforming conflict* (Herald Press, Harrisonburg, VA: 2021).

compassion allows us to say, “I messed up, and I am still worthy.” For those who nurture a relationship with God, resting in God’s love provides a deep comfort and reminds us that we are beloved.” – *The Space Between Us*, p.204.

Letting God draw us into the work of attending or tending to these hidden attachments and motivations can, as Pries noted, be painful, though. And so, it is crucial to practice self-compassion throughout this process. And in fact, when we practice self-compassion, something surprising occurs: we grow not only compassion for ourselves, but also compassion for the other; we learn not only to be gracious to ourselves, but also to the other. And so, Pries notes:

“...to receive ourselves in our wholeness...allows us to practice self-compassion for the wholeness of who we are. By accepting our feelings and our demons without judgment, it allows us to release these feelings...It also allows us to reestablish within us the capacity to see the full self of the other.” (155)

The cultivation of compassion for ourselves doesn’t happen automatically and so spiritual practices or disciplines are necessary and helpful forms of cultivation along the way – they are ways of tending, tilling, and inhabiting compassion so that we learn of it more and more.

One tried and true practice that has been inhabited by Christians throughout history is the practice of self-examination: a practice of placing ourselves open before God’s “steady gaze of love” as we ask to be searched and known, cleansed

and renewed.<sup>2</sup> In her book *Soul Feast*, Marjorie Thompson notes that there are two basic truths we need to know if we are going to “engage in self-examination as a healthy spiritual discipline,” namely that “*God loves us,*” and the second is that as humans we cannot escape “weakness” and “brokenness in relation to God,” we miss the mark and we often construct a “false self” to hide our failures.<sup>3</sup> I suspect that sometimes we like to hold on to one truth in absence of the other: we might affirm that God loves us but avoid our own brokenness, or we might obsess over our brokenness and refuse to believe that God loves us. Self-examination allows us to hold both of these truths together as we ask God to show us the truth about ourselves. To discuss this practice more, come to worship response today because I have more to share, but one more quote from Thompson will show us some of the benefits of self-examination as it pertains to compassion.

She notes:

“One of the most precious results of self-knowledge is greater compassion. The more clearly we see ourselves, the harder it becomes to judge the weaknesses and failures of others.” (*Soul Feast*, 105)

Betty Pries outlines one other significant spiritual practice that can help us cultivate self-compassion and thus compassion towards others as well (and again for more discussion come to WR). She calls it the “allow-accept-release-rest”

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<sup>2</sup> Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 90.

<sup>3</sup> *Soul Feast*, 90.

mantra. Pries notes that whenever we find ourselves in difficult situations in life, be they relational or otherwise, a mantra can help us stay grounded and seeking a compassionate way. Pries describes the 3 principles of this kind of mantra:

[SLIDE]

Using a daily Mantra (p.204-206)

Allow-Accept-Release-Rest Mantra – 3 principles

Accept self and other exactly as they are

Accept the pain of the current moment without ducking this pain

Speak a healthy truth into being

We've already covered so much this morning and there is so much more to say. To close, however, let's return to our scripture from Luke 10:25-28 and let's identify with the lawyer in the story. What was their story? What inner motivations and attachments drew them to test Jesus with this question about eternal life? What views of their neighbours might have been preventing them from wanting to show compassionate love? And what might the practice of self-compassion, of loving themselves, have done to help them love their neighbour? Perhaps we can imagine this lawyer heeding Jesus' words and going home to practice some self-reflection and self-compassion. Perhaps this lawyer, we could imagine, came away with this mantra that he used as he related to those around him in the days to come:

“I accept that I often try to justify myself. I release the need to always be right and to have control over everything and everyone in my life. I release myself and my neighbour into God's care. I rest in God's compassionate love, cultivating my heart, soul and mind, and giving me strength.” AMEN