

**FROM SILOS AND COMFORT ZONES TO COMPASSION; 1CORINTHIANS 8:1-13;
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There's little doubt we could use more compassion in the world. Our annual Understanding Islam series is trying to gain some understanding of the violent phenomenon known as ISIS, to understand in what sense it is called Muslim, and what makes it so appealing to not a few European and American (as well as Middle Eastern) young men and women who are drawn into its ranks at the rate of about a thousand a month.

At the risk of sounding like a drumbeat I would also acknowledge the lack of civility and compassion in our own Congress in Washington. The President seems to be bracing for a spate of vetoes not as a negotiating tool with Congress, as most of his predecessors have done, but as an act of defiance to a Republican controlled Congress that appears unwilling to compromise.

Then there is Albany and the Speaker's demise last week – a man of stoic reserve and little compassion for his colleagues or anyone apparently who did not embrace his agenda.

Yet, aren't the hardball politics in the world, nation and state a reflection of the fragmentation in our world, nation and neighborhoods. Our leaders mirror the polarization across the land in politics, socio-economic class, religion and race.

No wonder silos of like-minded people dot the map. A bunker mentality is too often a given. Even among my high school email list serve of about forty people who were good friends all those years ago and who stay in touch through the internet, even among old friends, we tiptoe gently around the politics of the day because of its splintering affect.

What's a Christian congregation to do in this brittle climate of apprehension and fear of engaging fellow human beings on matters that affect all of us; are we to play it safe and avoid contact with others for fear of offending or being offended and tiptoe our way through life? That doesn't sound like the Gospel to me.

If there are to be any bridges of mutual understanding to span the great divides of our time—if we are to find ways to discover the common experiences of human existence that transcend culture, politics and religion, it will only happen if we can find ways to put ourselves in one another's shoes, to have compassion.

And here we learn from St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians today, as well as from other notable sources, that compassion is not in limited supply like a natural resource – gold or diamonds.

Rather, compassion is something we can choose to cultivate or not in our daily routine and conduct. Paul's point in his discussion about food sacrificed to idols – though here you could insert the current debate du jour over anything – his point is that food or theology or political platforms ought not take precedence over the well-being of the community as a whole and the welfare of its members in particular.

But then he gives documentation for some activities that deepen compassion. For example, the affect of reading fiction that opens up the range of human emotion like the stories of Alice Munro or Don DeLillio vs. non-fiction.

Or volunteering which takes us outside of our comfort zones by going on mission trips and work projects to developing nations or neighborhoods of need or simply tutoring a child or washing dishes in a soup kitchen, these, studies show, are concrete ways to reawaken our empathy.

This makes compassion more of a choice than a given (as if some are born with more empathy than others). What Kristof is lobbying for is very close to what St. Paul was advocating for the church in Corinth or at Westminster. Compassion, Kristof says, is not an effete marker of weakness. It is a sign of civilization. St. Paul would agree.

There has been some buzz this past week about a new short biography of Vincent Van Gogh—a remarkably compassionate human being. He was, as you may know, a PK, a preacher’s kid; in fact, he was the son of a Calvinist or Presbyterian minister.

As a young person Van Gogh was stocky, inward-turning with hunched shoulders and a furrowed brow. He loved to read but was miserable at school. He quit at fourteen and began a life quest that rarely released him from struggle at best and suffering more commonly; this quest led ultimately to his brilliant ten year career as a painter who became, posthumously, the most popular artist in the world.

Van Gogh started trying to become a parish minister until he realized he lacked the patience and focus to pass the exams; then he embarked on another stint with an art-dealer where his uncle worked; traveling to London and Paris, he discovered the Impressionists and began forming his own opinions about art. Eventually, his brother Theo encouraged him to pursue drawing which Vincent had enjoyed as a child and finally, after teaching himself to draw he segued to painting.

His subject matter evolved from the people and landscapes of the industrial wasteland to the fields, sky and sea where he spent his last, disastrous, brilliant years. Yet, from the early sketches to last paintings Van Gogh’s work is alive with empathy, with feeling, with truth.

“Real artists paint things not as they are, in a dry analytical way, but as they feel them,” he said. “I adore Michelangelo’s figures, though the legs are too long and the hips and backsides too large. What I most want to do is to make of these incorrectnesses or adjustments of reality something that may be untrue but is at the same time more true than literal truth.” And he does, even a stand of pollard birches convey as much beauty in their misshapen, awkward reach to the sky as a poor family of potato eaters huddled at a table.

His portraits beat with the blood of real people; they’re not ham-fisted symbols but animated, sympathetic, and alive. Those roiling, curlicue clouds in *Starry Night* pulse with the heartbeat of the cosmos; a self portrait engulfs the artist’s face in a force field of raw energy. You have to “risk a little vertigo,” he told Theo.

I mention Van Gogh today in this meditation on compassion because he exercised the vision of compassion; he was able to see things more deeply perhaps through the eyes of his own suffering. So maybe in a sense we have to stay in touch with our own suffering and with the suffering of others or we lose touch with ourselves and one another. I will never forget a famous line of Gardner Taylor, the great African American preacher, who said, "the pain of the pastor is his passport into the lives of the people." And couldn't you say that about anyone, and what is pastoral care but the ministry of compassion that we all share?

It was that deeper perception of people and the world Van Gogh captured in his painting, while not as literally true as a photograph, does convey a deeper, more important truth – the common palette of emotion with which we paint our lives and see others and the world: joy, suffering, loss, triumph, remorse, satisfaction.

I would wager that's the kind of vocabulary and vision we need for seeing others and describing the world if we are to find our way out of our bunker mentalities and siloed self-interest. A way of living that does not run from or fear difference but accepts and sees our differences as reflections of who and what we are.

It wasn't until the end of his life that Van Gogh would finally be recognized for the genius he was; He is a 'great painter,' one critic of the day said, 'a sower of truth who will regenerate our decrepit art.'

That's the challenge we face in our neighborhoods and congregations across the heartland to the farthest coast – regenerating our decrepit social fabric in the communities and neighborhoods where we live.

This is a think global, act local mission: to regenerate and reawaken the gift of compassion. Surely, that is what we gather at this table today to do! And if we can do that, we can open the door to peace and justice from Ferguson, MO to the halls of Congress. Understanding Islam and Muslims today is a good start. Amen.