

# Compassion is the Code

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## Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (The Message)

*1 If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. 2 If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing. 3 If I give everything I own to the poor and even give my life as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.*

*4 Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, Doesn't have a swelled head, 5 Doesn't force itself on others, Isn't always "me first," Doesn't fly off the handle, Doesn't keep score of the sins of others, 6 Doesn't revel when others grovel, Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, 7 Puts up with anything, Trusts God always, Always looks for the best, Never looks back, But keeps going to the end.*

*8 Love never dies. Inspired speech will be over some day; praying in tongues will end; understanding will reach its limit. 9 We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete... 12 We don't yet see things clearly. We're still squinting through a dirty window pane. But it won't be long before it becomes clear again and we'll see it all, just as God sees us... 13 But for right now, until we are complete, we have three things to do to lead us toward that fullness: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly and to love extravagantly. And the best of those three is extravagant love!*

## Sermon

Just the other day I was pulling up to the stoplight that leaves the King Soopers parking lot onto College Avenue. I was heading home and had stopped in for a few essentials after doing my good deed for the day by taking Bella to a friend's house in southwest Fr. Collins for an end-of-school school party.

There, in the median, sat our old friend Arizona flying a sign that said, "Anything Helps!" Now some of you might remember Arizona from our fall retreat a couple years back. It was late afternoon and he was squinting into the sun and he looked like... well... he looked pretty bad. Suddenly I had "a desire to alleviate his suffering," or as Wikipedia calls it - "compassion."

Now I'm sure I could have rolled up the window and scooted past without him recognizing me. But I didn't; instead, I jumped out of the car handing him a \$5 bill before jumping quickly back in because the light had changed. I also hollered at him to "come by church" since he really needed a shower and could have used some clean clothes as well.

Typically, I do not patronize panhandlers and never give them money. Instead, I try to have a granola bar in my car's console so I can give them something nutritious instead of cash to buy "other things."

But to do that seemed almost mean at that moment. He looked so bad that I didn't really care if he used the money for drugs. This was hardly a case of "extravagant love" that 1 Corinthians 13 is encouraging. After all, I could have given him one of several \$20 bills in my wallet. I'm thinking that a more important question is, why do we so often make our acts of compassion so complicated? Far too often I know that I actually talk myself out of acting on my compassionate impulses. Why?

Like many, I believe that compassion is a critical, if not necessary, component of our basic humanness. So when we tamp it down or ignore our compassionate impulses, we also inhibit our growth as a human being. We can do this as social groups as well, especially as social service agencies or government bureaucracies; but even churches manage to do this.

We mean well, but too often place rules above compassion. Such seemed to be the case this past week when a group of us met with the mayor, two members of city council and maybe five city staff, on Tuesday afternoon right here in our sanctuary. A big thanks goes to Martha who was central to making this all happen. It was unprecedented (yes, Keith Mullet, I did manage to find a way to use that term!). They came and listened to us share what we do, heard directly from those we serve (JD and Santana shared), and listened to our pleas that we be allowed to house folks past the 6-month yearly allowance which will expire on June 30.

The Fire Marshal and Chief Building Inspector made it clear numerous times that their hands were tied since it is their job to implement the building code as adopted by the City Council. Before leaving the meeting early, the Mayor and council members shared their reluctance to change the code because the building code is "essential" for the health and welfare of our citizens. Maybe, with just a wee bit of sarcasm, I tried to point out the seeming irony that sleeping on the streets was safer for the homeless than sleeping inside such a dangerous building as ours.

Once our visitors had left it was clear that we all felt demoralized, angry, frustrated and offended, so several of us stayed, needing to process. After about a half an hour of this, I turned to Steven, who had also been in the meeting but had yet to say a word and I asked him how he thought the meeting went.

I love Steven and I am so proud of him for all the progress that he has made over the last several years. Multiple times we have let him come inside to stay - to keep him safe and sober, and multiple times, he relapsed. I never thought he would ever get off the streets alive! But here he is sober and keeping us in stitches with his dry humor. So his reply went something like this, "Well... (stroking his goatee) I guess they are telling us that there is no room in the city code for compassion?" Frankly, I was stunned and speechless (I know - hard to believe!).

During our meeting we acknowledged numerous times that we do see the importance of fire and building safety codes. Such codes are essential and can and do save lives. But we also tried to make it plain that it is also deeply imbedded in our faith to act and to care for the poor - especially our houseless neighbors.

But do these two things need to be in conflict? At what point can city codes actually become arbitrary and even counterproductive? For their credit, the city's code does allow us to house/shelter folks for up to 180 days (or 6 months) of the year without bringing our building up to full compliance for operating a shelter. And this is how we have operated thus far — six months in the latter half of last year and now six months so far this year.

When asked why our building is “safe” enough to house folks for 180 days but then suddenly on day 181 it is not safe, we were told that the city worked hard to craft the 180-day option as a compromise and that it is operating at a very great risk to do even this.

Finding exemptions or making changes to the code it seems, is impossible, similar, I guess, to making “mountains jump into the sea?” We tried presenting, what we thought were several “creative” ideas but none, we were told, would be able to fulfill the letter of the law

We all know that the word “code” can mean a number of things. Code is what runs our computers and makes applications and programs work. DNA, is the double helix polymer that carries the genetic instructions (or the genetic “code”) for the development, functioning, growth and reproduction of all known organisms... (Wikipedia). Code can also be a secret language or a way for one group to communicate with each other that others cannot understand. A code can be a “systematic statement of law, especially one that is given statutory force.” But there is also what we call a “moral code” which is “a system of principles” that inform and go beyond just simple “rules.” For those of us who use the Bible to seek moral clarity, it is the latter that must always take precedence over the former.

In the KJV bible that I grew up memorizing at a young age, 1 Corinthians 13 uses the word “charity” instead of “love.” What Paul describes is not the romantic love of weddings (usually where this passage is read), but a love, like charity, that is an action. In this passage, love DOES something. And if love does not do... well then everything else, not done in love is just meaningless.

Compassion is what kicks love into action, it is what motivates us “to go out of our way to relieve the physical, mental, or emotional pains of others...” (Wikipedia) This impulse to want to help another can also lead us to true empathy! The Jesus we know, followed closely, in both word and deed, the admonitions of the Prophet Isaiah to act out of compassion even if doing so would break rules. It is because of our compassion for others that people and even all of creation are truly healed and folks are set free.

Compassion is always the good, and right, and the natural thing to do! And Compassion must always take precedent over the rules, not only of society, but even those of the church. But, as Steven so wisely reminded me and all of us, compassion not only trumps the code - compassion is the code itself!