

# Compassion Never Goes Out of Style

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## Scriptures: Matthew 20:29-34 and Colossians 3:1-2 and 12

**Matthew 20:29** *As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed them. 30 There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" 31 The crowd sternly ordered them to shut up; but instead they shouted even louder, "Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!"*

*32 Jesus then came to a standstill and called them, saying, "What is it that you want me to do for you?" 33 They said to him, "Lord, let our eyes see again." 34 Moved with compassion, Jesus then touched their eyes and immediately they regained their sight and followed him.*

**Colossians 3:1** *So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth... 12 And as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.*

## Sermon

When we look around at our world these days and observe all that's going on, it's hard to ignore all the cruelty and divisiveness. The news constantly bludgeons us with stories of callousness and folks treating one other with disrespect and even contempt. It feels like everywhere we turn, folks are shouting at each other, one mass shooting follows the next, while wars and threats of war rage on. Harshness seems to be the norm, constantly eroding our humanity and eclipsing our ability to be compassionate and kind.

But I am here this morning to make the case that, in spite of these perceptions, compassion and empathy are actually making a comeback in our world. Crazy, I know, but then I do sometimes tend to have crazy thoughts! But according to recent research the data points us in that direction. "Things," we know, are not always exactly what they seem.

So let's take a moment to search our memory banks and recall how each one of us perceive how things were just a year ago, or maybe a decade ago, and then even a generation ago. How would you respond to the question, "Is the U.S. a more caring or less caring nation now than it was back then? Raise your hand if you think we are less compassionate now than we were a year or two ago... two decades ago... and a generation ago?"

But are our responses really true, supported by actual data, or are they merely a perception based on personal bias and experience? Is it not likely the case that from the beginning of documented human history, every generation of elders claims vociferously that "the younger" generation is bereft of society's most cherished values, if not totally and completely morally corrupted! This is certainly a prominent theme in our Holy Scriptures where each succeeding generation is surely headed to hell in a hand basket!

But memory is always subjective. Any attempt to harken back to some "golden" time when our society was good, let alone a period when America was truly "great," is problematic. "Good for whom?" is a question that always needs to be promptly asked.

Sure, the 19th century was filled with hope and promise and prosperity for many poverty stricken immigrants from Europe as our nation handed out free land in its push westward. But tragically, that

westward march happened at the genocidal cost of the natives who were already unfortunately living there.

The 1950s were a period of prosperity for many in our nation, but if you were black or brown it was a time of great racial injustice. As a member of the “Baby Boomers” (the generation that infamously ushered in the use of drugs, free sex and rock and roll!), I vividly recall the previous generations reacting to us by totally “freaking out,” convinced that we were going to destroy everything. But in our defense, we also have to remember the great advancements in civil rights and women’s rights, as well as an end to several “hot” wars and one big “cold” war, that occurred during that generation.

For those of you who think Americans have lost their compassion, the data would be on your side — that is, until recently. A little over a decade ago, research showed a troubling dip in empathy. Since the late 70s, psychologists have tried to measure empathy by asking millions of people how much they agreed with various statements such as, “I feel tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate.” In 2009 the average U.S. college student reported feeling less empathetic than 75 percent of students surveyed three decades earlier. This of course led to plenty of theories such as, we were too lonely to care about each other, or too stressed, or too siloed, or too consumed by technology, video games, and social media. The younger generations, of course, took most of the heat, and were labeled as too self absorbed and addicted to the Internet!

The research appeared to provide new fuel for the same old fears that the moral state of our nation was on inevitable decline. But in actuality, measuring the decline in empathy also revealed something that researchers hadn’t considered — empathy is not a fixed trait. Do we take the level of empathy for granted and assume that each of us is born with a certain amount of it and are then stuck there for life? I think most of us would disagree with that, because when we consider our own experience, that is simply not true. Most of us can trace an actual increase in empathy over time. One of the lead researchers said at the time, “The fact that empathy is declining means that there’s more fluidity to it than previously thought. It means that empathy can change.”

Then a year or so ago in 2023, she and her colleagues published an update to that earlier study. The update found that empathy among young Americans is up, reaching levels similar to the highs of the 1970s. Cough.. cough, the highs occurring when, cough... some of us “Baby Boomers” were young! This data deserves to be celebrated! Right? Right?!

But why aren’t we celebrating this increase in compassion? One possibility could be the effects of our recent collective suffering. Since 2009, we have faced the Great Recession and a pandemic. Tough times to be sure, but for all their attendant horrors, we also know that hard times can also bring people together. In reality, in the wake of those and other catastrophes, acts of kindness ticked up, as complete strangers crossed over barriers of race and class to help others.

More recently, researchers have actually chronicled what they are calling a “pandemic of kindness,” as donations to charity and volunteering increased in the face of COVID-19. “The World Happiness Report” (yes, that is a “thing”) typically looks at three clues to find kindness and benevolence: 1) whether people helped a stranger, 2) made a monetary donation, or 3) volunteered in the past month.

Helping, donating, and volunteering all rose worldwide in 2020 and actually surged to a new record level in 2021. For example, in 2022, more folks in each country surveyed had recently helped a stranger (an average of over 13% more), donated (over 6% more) and volunteered (over 4% more). In the U.S., the percentage of those who had recently helped a stranger rose from about 64% in 2019 to about 76% in 2022. In addition, and I’m sure this doesn’t come as a surprise to any of you here this morning, there is also

“a happiness bonus” that also comes to folks when they help someone else and as well when they see others putting their goodness into action — they feel good!

But, as we say, “perception is everything” and so we need ask ourselves another hard question: “Will most folks react to this good news as strongly as they did to the bad news that preceded it?” Typically we “modern” humans pay more attention to the negative news than we do to the positive.

This bias toward listening to the bad news can also lead us to wrong conclusions about our world and the people in it. Far too often we judge people more readily based on the worst that they’ve done, rather than on their best. I know personally that I routinely underestimate how kind, caring, and open-minded others are. We seem prone to seeing the worst side of each other and to imagine that things are only getting worse, even when they are not.

In another recent survey, nearly 600,000 people were asked to consider how the current generation compares to years past. Across dozens of countries and several decades, folks agreed that we are less honest, kind, and moral than in the past. But this decline is actually an illusion, since in other surveys, when folks were asked to reflect on the kindness and morality that they actually personally experience from strangers, or coworkers, and friends, their responses remained steady across decades.

Another example of a pronounced discrepancy between perception and reality is how most in our nation view crime in the U.S. Many surveys of voters show that the rise in crime is a major concern, but in actuality reported incidents of violent crime are less than half now than what they were in 1991!

It seems that data seldom overcomes our personal bias — tell us something new, right? And so, I sadly fear that the comeback of American compassion will most likely also fly under the radar. But we, those of us here this morning, can do something about it. We can choose to either only pay attention to callousness and cruelty around us — and there’s certainly plenty of that! Or, we can choose to balance the news we consume, keeping a lookout for those acts of kindness and care that are also happening. And the data is also clear: There’s plenty of that, too.

Currently we humans, the world over, spend more than 2 trillion dollars every year on clothing and footwear! These are necessities to be sure, but we also know that far too much of what we buy goes far beyond that which is truly necessary. Much of it is spent so the we can keep up with the latest styles.

However, the writer of our Colossians passage we read this morning, challenges us to do something else instead: dress ourselves up in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience instead. Our reading from the Gospel this morning is also not an isolated instance where Jesus healed and helped others because he was moved by his compassion for them. In fact if you read the Gospels you’ll see it happened all the time. And, I guess it should go without saying, that we too are now expected to do the same. We put on compassion, not only because we have been told to be compassionate by Jesus, but because we have also been shown great compassion. And not only do acts of compassion place us into a more full relationship with Jesus, it can also kick in a happiness bonus as well.

Our perceptions and the perceptions of those around us are only likely to change as we see and experience concrete acts of kindness. And so in the end, it is important that others see compassion. For unlike our clothing and shoes that eventually wear out and quickly go out of fashion, compassion never wears out, nor does it ever go out of style!

**For references to articles about compassion and happiness, see the next page.**

## References Cited in the Sermon

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