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**REV. DR. DANIEL KANTER PREACHES HIS FINAL
SERMON BEFORE PART ONE OF HIS SABBATICAL**

DECEMBER 29TH | ONE SERVICE AT 11 AM | REBROADCAST AT 7 PM CT

Many people in this church have asked me many times why we pray. The simple answer is I believe it changes the prayer, and I don't know if it changes the one who may or may not receive the prayer. I know that when someone prays for me I feel their care, and so I carry that with me because I'm no believer in magic but I do believe in compassion, I do believe in prayer. Frederick Buechner, the author of our reading today also wrote this. He wrote that, "Compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it's like to live inside somebody else's skin. It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too." A lesson on compassion I thought was something we might need today.

We just went through a long season of Christmas, some of us held a lot of expectations and hosted family and made gifts and gave gifts and others hid from the holiday. Whichever you are, your compassion might be running a little thin right now. I know mine is. In addition to preparing for Christmas in my home with all the above issues and preparing for Christmas Eve in church, the biggest day of the year I am preparing to go on sabbatical. In a few hours, I will board a flight to England and then to India where I will be with the church pilgrims to visit our siblings in Northeast India. Then I will stay on another month by myself studying and translating some of their hymns and looking for clues in their indigenous roots of their modern Unitarian expression.

And then, I will go to Auckland, New Zealand for two Sundays and explore around New Zealand with my wife. All this is great, I'll be preaching at the UU Church in New Zealand in Auckland you should come and join me there. All this is great. It actually takes months of preparation to arrive at this moment, and it is a gift I understand, a gift only academics and clergy get to use to renew and reflect and to you, I am grateful for that gift. I am also feeling quite drained. I'm not complaining about what's

coming, just feeling it. And when I get drained, my compassion leaks out onto the floor and starts heading for the low points in my life. And I know that I have to scoop it back up and see if I can reclaim it because what else is there?

We just spent a whole month reminding ourselves that love is possible, that birth, the birth of liberation is real that we can be saved by our actions for other people. We lit candles and we made meals and we shared special music and hoped it would change us, and maybe it did and maybe it didn't. As a parent, I always looked for how quickly it would take for that holiday glow, the joy and goodwill of Christmas Day to evaporate. Sometimes it was hours in my house and sometimes it was days. I think it goes away partly because we try too hard or we forget the lessons or maybe we faked it the whole time. Or we forget that these spiritual lessons are lifetime callings, not just special holiday commandments. To find more kindness, to feel what others feel, that we are never free until we are all free.

Sometimes we forget that the smallest events like the poem we read says, "Hold the greatest clues to what it means to truly be human." Sometimes we forget that our job in life is not the job we are paid for or the roles we took on, but rather the job of bringing each other life, noticing moments that bring us to tears, holding the complexity of what is against our heart, what we hope for, to hold those special moments that bring tears to our eyes or those strange coincidences that bring special people into our midst. Sometimes we forget that we can't solve much except for what is going on inside us. Sometimes we forget to look upon one another with compassion rather than judgment. I caught myself this week thinking the elderly in my life are somehow compromised because they can't hear so well or they can't move so fast.

I found myself thinking that the young people around me move too fast and miss the details of life. And those judgments cover over my ability to feel what it's like to live in another's skin, to experience the special moments we are living through. I read a story this past week about a doctor named Julian Abel. He worked for years in palliative care helping people die with dignity and he talks a lot about compassion. And he says the most important thing in life for good health above all, above giving up smoking or drinking or your special diet you're about to go on in the new year, are developing important social relationships," which just a side note doesn't mean go eat and smoke and drink anything you want to get that social engagement, right?

But he says when we develop strong social bonds, when we care about one another, when we notice what others need, when we show up for each other, when we invite others into our lives without judgment, our bodies are more healthy. Our biochemistry can be measured to show levels of oxytocin that are naturally created in us through these encounters and help us toward health and wellbeing. Abel took this theory a step further and studied communities in England who deliberately built what we would call small group ministries, they called them conversation cafes. In one southern English town they had 12,000 deliberate conversations led by trained citizens in a town of 2800 people just in one year, 12,000 deliberate conversations. At the end of it, the people reported feeling more connected and more compassionate towards their neighbors.

Friendships went up, ancillary dinner parties broke out, people had more time to stop and consider each other at the market and in the square. And most interestingly, the rate of emergency room admissions went down 15%, while a neighboring community that had not conducted conversation cafes had the constant increase in rates of emergency room admissions. This all reminded me of a movement started in Texas by a woman in Austin a few years ago. The movement was started by a woman named Kristin Schell. See years ago, she had a picnic table delivered to her backyard for a party. It didn't really quite fit and she pondered what she was supposed to do with this big picnic table and then she realized something. She said she knew that God had put this in her way for a reason and wanted to have her put it in the front of the house rather than hiding in the back of the house.

Now, I have my doubts that God makes furniture placement decisions, but soon enough, her neighbors started stopping by when she went out in the morning for her coffee or to work. And then, children in the neighborhood started doing homework at her picnic table in the front yard and neighbors started gathering to talk and listen to one another. So, she painted the table turquoise to make it stand out and she noticed that the neighbors were having conversations that they would never have had if the table wasn't there. They were listening and being present to one another. She said this as this experiment started to turn into a movement she said, loving her neighbors has drawn her deeper into a relationship with God. And the important thing she said that I like the best was this.

She said, "When we open our front door and take steps out into the front yard, good things happen. Open your door," she said, "And let God do the rest." Now, I don't necessarily agree with Kristin's theology to see this as a movement for God, I see this as a movement where she got better at being a human being. She became a more compassionate person because she did a simple thing because she moved a table to her front yard and started sitting at it. I can see in the stories about her that came later as this movement moved out of Texas and into the rest of the country, that her wellbeing and the wellbeing of people in neighborhoods that have turquoise tables increased because one woman decided not to hide in her backyard because she decided to live into other's skin or at least invite them into hers.

The turquoise tables started popping up all over the country after Kristin's experiment. Maybe you should get one. When we go out into the world with a measure of openness to other people and invitational demeanor, a little compassion, we try to see the world from their eyes we all gain something. Frederick Buechner says, "Maybe it's all a utterly meaningless this human living, maybe it's all unutterly meaningful. If you want to know which, pay attention to what it means to be human in a world that half the time we're in love with and half the time scares the hell out of us. The unexpected sound of your name on somebody's lips, the good dream, the strange coincidence, the moment that brings tears to your eyes, the person who brings life to your life, even the smallest events, hold the greatest clues."

Friends, I leave here with my own advice as I go out into the world for part one of sabbatical, 10 weeks in the world. I will miss you as part one of sabbatical takes place. I'll be back in two months to check in and see how you are. I'm going to try to practice what I preach today, practice this in places far and

wide with complete strangers and friends. I'm going to see what it is like to hear my name on somebody else's lips and see what strange coincidences I can notice. While I do that, maybe try and practice a little compassion with yourself and with each other. We all need it. Because as Howard Thurman says, "When the song of angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the real work of Christmas begins to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoners, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among people, to make music in the heart."

So, go out your front door and see who's out there waiting for you to open your heart, to hear your name on another's lips, to practice compassion. And to that in this simple sermon, I say to you, Amen.