

This month of March is Women's History month so I'd like to open today by sharing a poem about compassion written by Georgia Harkness. She has been called one of the first significant female theologians and she was the first woman professor at an American seminary. The poem is called *The Agony of God*.

I listen to Your agony, O God;
I who am fed,
Who never yet went hungry for a day.
I see the dead,
The children starved for lack of bread;
I see and try to pray.
I listen to Your agony, O God;
I who am warm,
Who never yet lacked a sheltering home.
In dull alarm,
The dispossessed of hut and farm
Aimless and transient roam.

I listen to Your agony, O God;
I who am strong,
With health and love and laughter in my soul.
I see a throng
Of stunted children reared in wrong
And yearn to make them whole.

I listen to Your agony, O God;
But know full well
That not until I share their bitter cry,
Earth's pain and hell,
Can You within my spirit dwell
To bring Your Kingdom nigh.

When it comes to compassion, we could say that it is *heart* work. Harkness writes, "I listen to Your agony, O God..." so clearly her ears are open. She also writes, "I see the dead, the children starved for lack of bread..." so we know her eyes are capable of seeing also. But then comes the brutal honesty, "I who am fed, who never yet went hungry for a day...I see and try to pray."

Just within this first stanza of the poem, I suspect many of us may see ourselves. For generations now, first through radio in the thirties, then television in the fifties, and

now via cable TV, smartphones, and the internet, “listening to Your agony, O God” and being able to “see the dead, the children starved for lack of bread,” are not just local but global realities that have been very much with us. For some of us, perhaps because of being inundated with problems and concerns we can get what has been termed “compassion fatigue.” When too many problems demand our attention we can become overwhelmed and turn it all off. On the flip side though, for some of us, with so many distractions available to us, we may do the opposite. We choose to turn away and not be forced to watch what Harkness calls “a throng of stunted children reared in wrong.”

Whether you see yourself in one group or the other — or at times both, the honesty of Harkness’ poem reveals that heart work is hard work. Heart work, by my definition, is to “feel with” another person. I would guess you understand the phrase, ‘The longest journey in the world is just eighteen inches’ — the distance from the head to the heart. But if we believe that we have to go on this long journey by ourselves, it is easy to see why it is so daunting and we may not ever get very far. I wonder if this is what Harkness, the poet was doing which is why she writes, “I see and try to pray.”

Something else that I notice is how often Harkness uses “I” language. Generally, that is right and good when we are talking about our own feelings, ‘I feel this...’ But when it comes to doing hard/heart work, believing that it is all up to me, as an individual, well... that’s just not how God wishes for us to think or to act. So, it is very telling how Harkness pivots in the last stanza of the poem. She writes:

I listen to Your agony, O God;
But know full well
That not until I share their bitter cry,
Earth’s pain and hell,
Can You within my spirit dwell
To bring Your Kingdom nigh.

In order to avoid believing I need to fix it all or do such and so by myself, we are called on to listen (truly listen) to people. To seek to be fully present with them, and to walk in their shoes. This is, of course, no easy task! Yet just as we know from experience

how much easier it was for us to get through a time of bitter pain and hell by letting others in to accompany us, I believe that you have the heart to do this for and with others. So let's imagine this morning that somehow you and I courageously are willing to share another person's or people's bitter cry. Now I suspect the other person who you "feel with" will not have all the answers about how to fix everything either. Yet I would fully expect that they as you listen to one another, your trust will grow and the relationship will grow.

This ability to lament with another person is a gift from God. Don't put down this gift by calling it a whining session or a "pity party." That makes it sound wrong. Sometimes, just being a compassionate listener can do wonders for people. And keep in mind, that as God's community, the Church, we need one another. We are not about building walls around ourselves — that will only serve to give the Evil One yet another stronghold in our lives and in this world. Acting solo we are divided and become easy prey; united we are capable of playing an integral part in God's kingdom.

Our Confirmation students have been studying the Lord's Prayer of late and we talked about how when we pray, "thy kingdom come," Martin Luther writes in the Small Catechism that God's kingdom will indeed come without our praying for it — but we ask in this prayer that God's kingdom might come in our lives. I believe today's readings have everything to do with what I've been sharing with you so far. God wishes for us to have life, abundant life. In our second lesson, Paul writes to Timothy to instruct him saying, "As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life."

Now, when we look at our Gospel text, it would appear that by our typical standards, the rich man lived an abundant life. But how often do we hear stories of

wealthy people who seem “to have it all” yet their wealth only serves to mask their problems in life? Perhaps our rich man in this story was an empty man. Our unnamed rich man is never given an identity and we learn that he never truly reached out to Lazarus, though clearly he had ample opportunity. On the other hand, Jesus gives Lazarus an identity, a name for himself, he enjoys personhood. The rich man allowed Lazarus to be at his gate (where he could beg) but apparently never attempted to go about the heart work of showing compassion. He is the type of person who may have not seemed terribly hard-hearted but he went about caring for others with a halfheartedness — and a half-a-heart is incapable of compassion.

So where do these lessons today leave us? I believe they leave us with a warning to watch out for hearts devoid of compassion but they also leave us with a word of hope. The word of hope is two-fold. First of all, the name Lazarus means, “God helps.” God will not leave us alone with nowhere to turn. Whenever we, like Lazarus are the recipients of evil things, we can be comforted that God is there with us. And most certainly, we can also be assured that the day of feasting and enjoyment will come. The second word of hope for us comes at the conclusion of the Gospel lesson. We hear the rich man ask permission to have Lazarus speak to his brothers because “if someone goes to them from the dead, then they will repent.” However, while the rich man’s request is denied, we know that our Redeemer lives. Jesus did in fact rise from the dead so that we might have new life in his name. There is every reason to hope in Jesus Christ who demonstrated the heart work of compassion with such magnitude and with such perfection. Jesus is our model and our guide as we make this journey from our heads to our hearts to work together to best act in love toward our neighbor. Let us pray:

○ Lord, for Jesus’ sake, who gave his life for us, open our hearts to allow your kingdom to reign in us. Unite us as we go about the heart work of compassion — with neighbors near to us and throughout our nation and the world. Amen