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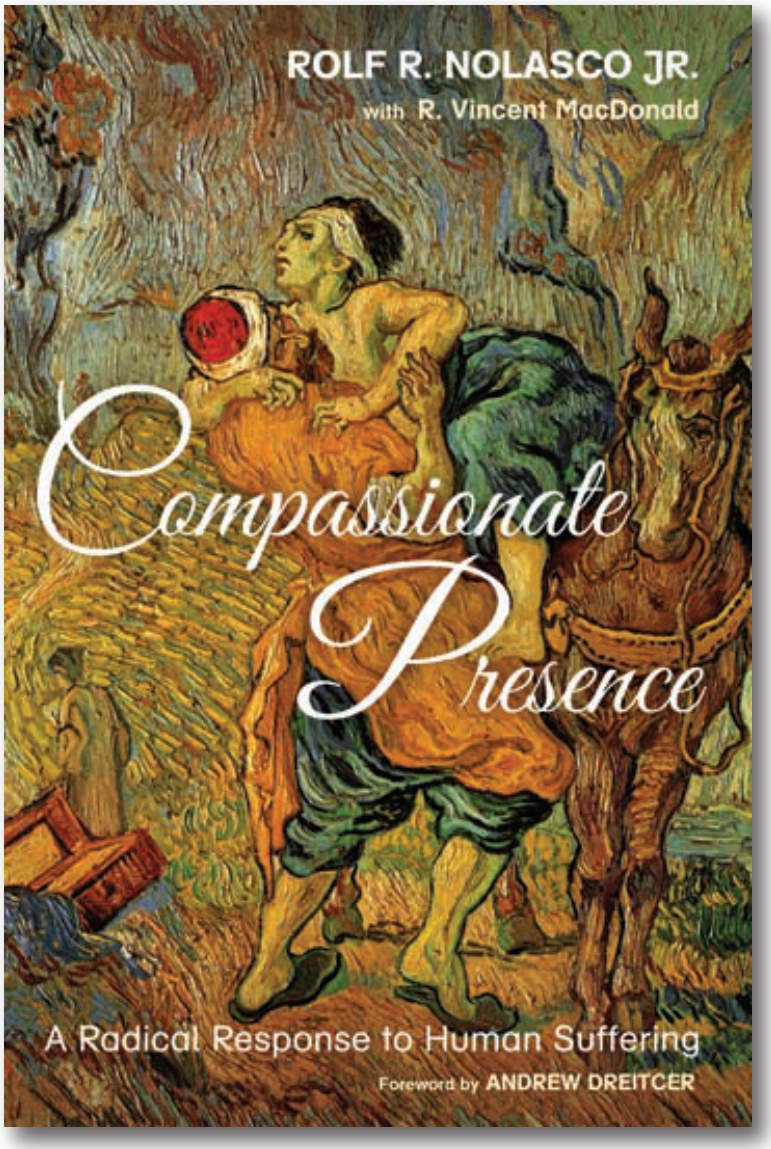
Compassionate Presence

A Radical Response to Human Suffering



ROLF R. NOLASCO JR.

with **R. Vincent MacDonald**

Foreword by **ANDREW DREITCER**

Compassion plays a central role in the teachings of all world religions. Christianity in particular demonstrates its vitality through compassionate engagement with those suffering with Christ serving as a paradigm and source of motive power. These concrete acts of mercy and solidarity disclose God's intimate regard for the welfare of humanity. The purpose of this book is to affirm compassion as the pulsating heartbeat of Christian theology and praxis through the hermeneutical perspectives of brain science, psychology, and practical theology. More importantly, it offers readers specific compassion cultivation practices that will nurture the trait of compassion as a way of incarnating God's compassionate presence and response to a world marked with suffering of all kinds.

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"Nolasco and MacDonald remind us that compassion is the vital center of the Christian life. They not only ground compassion theologically, they explain how it works neuro-physiologically. In a world all too prone to demonizing the other, their work comes as a healing grace, an act of compassion itself."

—FRANK ROGERS

author of *Practicing Compassion* and *Compassion in Practice: The Way of Jesus*

Rolf R. Nolasco Jr. is Professor of Counseling Psychology at Providence Theological Seminary, Calgary, Alberta. He is the author of *The Contemplative Counselor: A Way of Being* (2011).

R. Vincent MacDonald is a registered psychologist in Alberta.

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Foreword

Almost fifteen years ago my late wife, Wendy, was diagnosed with brain cancer. She was a Presbyterian minister, a noted preacher, a beloved pastor—and the mother of two girls in their early teens. Soon after the tumor appeared she lost much of her short-term memory, half her vision, and her ability to manage her daily life. Eventually she was unable to walk without the benefit of a cane or a loved one's arm. Most days found her in bed or simply resting.

But she kept preaching. Yes, all through the ten months of her cancer she kept preaching, right up until some days before her death. She preached through Ordinary Time, Advent, Christmas, and Lent, and was supposed to preach on Easter Sunday—but couldn't get out of bed that morning. She slept, instead. And soon entered her own resurrection.

Each week during her illness Wendy prepared for her sermon with my help. Her process looked like this: she asked me what the lectionary texts were, let an idea come to her in that moment, and instructed me on what research to do to provide background on the topic. So I did her research. I read my findings aloud to her. She guided me in further research, if necessary. And then, unable to write or type, she constructed a sermon in her mind.

Every Saturday evening Wendy would ask me (as she did at the end of every day), "What day is it?" "Saturday," I'd say. "Am I preaching tomorrow?" she'd ask. "Yes" I'd say. But by that point she had no memory of her sermon topic. No memory of it at all. She would be anxious for a while. But then even the thought of preaching would pass—until I reminded her the next morning that she was scheduled to be in the pulpit. We would go to church, and still she had no recollection of what she had meant to say. That would be the case right up until she sat down in front of the congregation to deliver her message.

Then she would remember. And she would preach for an hour. Lucidly. Brilliantly. Beautifully. Profoundly. With no sign of short-term memory loss, and with her vision seemingly restored, she occasionally called out to people she noticed in the congregation, drawing everyone into her words of grace. Wendy's sermons packed the sanctuary Sunday after Sunday.

The church members and visitors said of her preaching, "It's the Holy Spirit." The neuro-oncologist said, "There's a tumor in the occipital lobe."

What was going on here? Was Wendy's Sunday morning brilliance her brain on God? Or on cancer? Or neither? Or both?

And then, of course, there was the compassion. It came in floods. Family members began arriving to lend a hand. The wider community joined efforts to deliver food, ferry our daughters from place to place, and provide a constant presence in the house when I could not be there. Wishes for healing, prayers for wholeness, and gifts of grace came from congregations and convents, friends of friends, and folks completely unknown to us from across the country and around the globe.

And the compassion came not only *to* Wendy, but *from* Wendy. Church members and others came to her bedside to receive pastoral care. Or they phoned her for words of compassionate wisdom. During those visits or calls Wendy was fully present, the warm, caring, no-nonsense spiritual counselor she had always been. And then, more often than not, she would sleep—until the next pastoral call.

What was going on here? Where did all of this compassion come from? How was Wendy able to conjure it up from the midst of her exhaustion? How did mass quantities of compassion suddenly appear from the world around us and beyond? What prompted and sustained it? Was it God? Or bodies responding naturally? Or the pressure of cultural and religious responsibilities? Or none of these? Or all of them?

I relate this story of pain and miracles and questions because for me it crystallizes the vital concerns of the book you are about to read. In these pages Nolasco and MacDonald tackle head on complex issues that were raised (vividly) by my wife's cancer and (more subtly) by my daily efforts (and yours, perhaps) to live a life that is faithful to Divine Love. Christians and others have struggled with such issues across time, continents, and cultures: What is the nature of compassion? Why am I compassionate to some people and not to others? Why in some times and not in others? Which part of my life comes from my own efforts and which part is Divine Compassion working in me? What is the relationship between my brain

and my mind, and between these two and God's work in my life? Where does my body fit into this? In health? In sickness? How can compassion sustain me in times of stress, trauma, and pain? What keeps me from a path of compassion? What helps me become more compassionate?

To address such questions, Nolasco and MacDonald skillfully draw on the ancient wisdom of Scripture, theologians, and spiritual sages. But I am pleased to say that they also offer us wisdom from new sources. That is, they plumb the insights of the most up-to-date understandings of cognitive neuroscientists, neuropsychologists, social neuroscientists, and neurophysiologists. Just as the ancients addressed burning faith questions with the best science of their eras, Nolasco and MacDonald apply to such questions the best scientific understandings of our own era. What's more, they do this not in conflict with faith, but to help us know how to respond more completely to the Divine invitation to compassion. Through this enlightening mix of the old and the new, we come to see (among other things) how brain research relates to taking on the mind of Christ; how current understandings of emotion illuminate the compassion of Jesus, how moral rules can be appropriately understood in light of how our brains and bodies work; and how compassion grows through mindful attention to our feelings, our physical states, and our stances toward others.

As I look back over the period of my late wife's illness, I recognize that I would have been greatly helped at that time by what Nolasco and MacDonald offer us in these pages. It isn't that they would have definitively answered all my questions; no one can know for sure what the ravages of cancer bring or how the Spirit of compassion moves in, through, and around that trauma. Some things remain mysteries in our lives. But they do give me a new way to see such things, new perspectives on how compassion flows from, interacts with, and transforms even the most difficult of situations. Had I known then what Nolasco and MacDonald have now taught me, I could have been more present, grounded, and stable in my care-giving. They show me how I might find appropriate, courageous, compassionate ways forward in the face of the worst that life might bring. For in the pages of their book I find ways to settle into Divine Compassion—vital for sustaining strength and hope when the world around us seems to be crumbling. And I find ways to cultivate compassion for myself—necessary for those of us who never live up to our own expectations. And I discover ways to form compassion for others—required if we are to "love our enemies."

In short, I feel blessed to have such an illuminating, wise, practical guide to radical compassion in response to human suffering. And I trust that you will feel the same.

Andrew Dreitcer
Claremont School of Theology

Acknowledgements

As the traditional African saying goes, "it takes a village to raise a child." This little book maybe the brainchild of a singular person but it has taken a whole village to turn it into something useful and hopefully edifying and transforming. In this village we were accompanied by several individuals whose encouragement and direction kept us focused, inspired, and committed to finish this task with delight and enthusiasm—David Johnson, Stan Hamm, Lissa Wray-Beal, Rod Lantin, and the staff at Tyndale House and Faraday Institute for Science and Religion in Cambridge, England.

We were also taught greatly by our students at Providence Theological Seminary, our clients and fellow parishioners whose perseverance and resilience during their darkest hour has served as a source of light and revelation during the writing process. To the editorial staff at Wipf & Stock, especially Matthew Wimer and Rodney Clapp, thank you for believing in this project.

Lastly, our journey would not have reached its destination without the quiet and reassuring presence of our families whose love and belief in us buoyed us forward into the completion of this book.

Soli Deo Gloria.

Introduction

"Hello, I am Baymax, your personal healthcare companion,"[1] says the white inflatable robot to Hiro Hamada upon hearing his cry of distress. Created by Hiro's older brother Tadashi, Baymax assesses his patient's condition, tends to his wounds, and offers him a lollipop for being a good boy. The plump and huggable robot then gives Hiro the code words to deactivate him—"I am satisfied with my care"—which he utters in confusion and disbelief.

There lies the beginning of a beautiful friendship between the two principal characters of the movie *Big Hero 6*. This exchange also captures Baymax's raison d'ętre, that is, to heal the sick and injured, those within his presence. In more clinical terms, as a healthcare robot, his sole purpose is to respond to suffering through timely and accurate assessment and informed and effective intervention until health or well-being of the patient is regained or restored. The healing practice is carried out in a nonthreatening manner as evidenced by his calm reassuring voice and soft and cushy appearance—Baymax is "a big marshmallow" as Hiro describes him. His companionship provides comfort and assurance and his intent to help knows no bounds.

Tadashi's genius creation of a healthcare robot is meant to address the ubiquitous nature of suffering as experienced by the residents of the archetypal city San Fransyoko. Universal themes of loss, greed, deceit, selfishness, and revenge are intertwined with the human thirst and satisfying nature of faithful companionship afforded by Hiro's best friends and Tadashi's former colleagues at the nerd school, namely, Honey Lemon, Go Go Tomago, Wasabi, and Fred. Together with Hiro and Baymax they constitute the titular Big Hero 6, whose meteoric rise to fame as protectors and saviors of the city is endearingly predictable yet funny and captivating. It will leave the viewer wanting for his own personal healthcare companion, perhaps a

1. *Big Hero 6*.

human version of Baymax's core trait of compassionate presence, especially during times of distress and suffering.

Through yet another film this outpouring of compassion during times of great need is embodied by Pastor Jay Reinke, which is chronicled in the feature-length documentary film entitled *The Overnighters*.[2] As the minister of Concordia Lutheran Church Pastor Jays takes on the formidable task of opening the church's doors to a throng of unemployed strangers in search for a better life in the oil boom town of Williston, North Dakota. As it turns out their American dream quickly became a nightmare when the grim reality of scant job prospects and absence of housing descended upon them.

Sensing an urgency to meet a pressing need and driven by passion, faith, and commitment to the call of Christ, Pastor Jay and members of this local church transposed its building into a makeshift dwelling. "There is room in the inn" for those displaced by the lure of economic prosperity. Day in and day out the "overnighters," as Pastor Jay calls them, now have a place to lay their heads as they work or continue to look for work. The central tenet of Christian hospitality to the strangers is vivified through the outstretched arms of embrace extended to those who need it the most.

Everybody happy? Not quite, as that is only half of the story. As the ministry to the overnighters continues and evolves, the cracks that are hidden underneath the walls of the church and the community at large are laid bare. The secret and checkered lives of some of the overnighters are soon revealed. Indeed, a perfect storm is brewing and it is about to make landfall on this unsuspecting midwestern community.

Some members of Concordia Lutheran started to raise their concerns over the optics and outcomes of hosting itinerant laborers and unemployed into their fold. The city council, armed with political voice and power, imposed its will upon Pastor Jay and ordered him to shut the program down. Pressures from all sides weighed heavily on this self-sacrificing shepherd of the flock and wandering sheep. Not long after, the pastor's own wounds and struggles tucked away for so long and conveniently by ministry duties and priorities began to surface and pester. All these conspired against the noblest intention to show compassion by well-meaning individuals, who find themselves at odds with each other's beliefs and priorities. In the midst of this personal, societal, and spiritual quagmire, the overnighters are left to fend for themselves and Pastor Jay is forced to confront his own pain.

2. *The Overnighters*.

Introduction

Wouldn't it be nice to have the Big Hero 6 make an appearance in Williston, North Dakota! At least, within the realm of playful imagination, Baymax and his cohort can wipe out the pain and suffering that the central characters are grappling with in that riveting and layered documentary film. But that would be wishful thinking, wouldn't it? However, what is not beyond imagination and blatantly clear in real life is the fact that human suffering is all around us and that we have the innate capacity to alleviate and transform it through acts of compassion. Both films address this twin reality within the confines of the medium in which they are presented. Hence, they are limited in breadth and scope yet good enough to crack wide open these themes that demand further exploration and nuanced description.

This little book is an attempt at doing exactly that—to provide a thick description of compassion from the rich tradition of theology, psychology, and brain science. Compassion is something that people experience especially when confronted with the stark reality of suffering. This subjective experience is layered and littered with specific emotional states, thought processes, and behavioral responses that can be disentangled and understood more fully. Though acts of compassion can easily be spotted, its underpinnings are far more complex yet encouragingly discernible.

Like any human experience, compassion has a neurological basis. With advances in neuroscience, brain networks responsible for the experience of compassion have now been identified and mapped. Certainly, this has a huge bearing not only in understanding the neural correlates of compassion but also in designing specific practices that help strengthen these neural wirings. Based on the intertwining components of compassion alone it behooves us to approach this subject matter from an integrative perspective. As said previously, we are drawing from the rich reservoir of complementary disciplines that have offered significant insights into this issue, albeit in separate quarters and independent of each other. By bridging these disciplines into one coherent and coordinated whole we offer more extensive and penetrating coverage on the subject matter than is possible through single disciplinary means. This effort is inspired by those who blazed the trail in relating religion and theology with brain science, with astounding and pragmatic outcomes.[3]

3. See, for example, Barrett, *Cognitive Science Religion and Theology;* Brown and Strawn, *The Physical Nature of the Christian Life*; Clarke, *All in the Mind?*; Jeeves and Brown, *Neuroscience Psychology and Religion;* and McNamara, *The Neuroscience of Religious Experience.*

At the heart of this rather prodigious project lies the grounding and sustaining element of the Christian faith. Its inspiration has blossomed from God's acts of compassion all throughout the ages without fail and is calling us to restore compassion at the center of our faith life. The resources that we have at our disposal to accomplish this task are immense and the grain of truth scattered in various disciplines and wisdom traditions are there for us to discern and distill. As we answer this call and set out on a journey that will have us traverse various paths, we hold on to the intimate knowledge of God who is our anchor and guide and whose incarnation in Jesus Christ offers a compelling portrait of compassionate presence.

Lest we get lost in the realm of ideas, this book aims at couching the discussion in an experience-near fashion. Life is replete with human interest stories of suffering and compassionate acts, some of which will be infused into the narrative with great care and sensitivity. These are stories of real people both near and far and whose identity will remain hidden to protect their privacy. Some of these are our own experiences; others are culled from our experience of life both in the domains of personal and professional. Our vocations as professors, psychotherapists, and pastors of local congregations have afforded us an intimate look into lives of our students, clients, and fellow believers. Their life stories have intersected with ours and have made us better clinicians, caring workers in the vineyard of God, and ultimately simply persons questing to incarnate God's compassion in the little corner of the world we live in. In line with this personal touch, a significant portion of the book is devoted to a detailed discussion of compassion cultivation practices that individuals and groups may want to use as part of their spiritual disciplines or personal and communal formation. After all, this book is conceived first and foremost as a practical guide to a more compassionate life rooted within the framework and narrative of the Christian tradition.

The Roadmap of the Journey

Now that the general contour of the book has been laid out, we can proceed with a thorough description of its components, starting with a brief definition of compassion. Compassion is an innate human disposition that is evoked within us when confronted with suffering and fuels our desire to alleviate and transform it. As we know, compassion plays a central role in the teachings of all world religions. Christianity, in particular, authenticates

itself and demonstrates its vitality through compassionate engagement with those suffering. Such commitment to "suffer with" is deeply grounded in Jesus Christ, who serves as its paradigm and source of motive power. Compassion is a visible expression of God's solidarity with and intimate regard for the welfare of humanity, which is punctuated by the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Sadly, sustained acts of compassion most often recede into the background and discourse on beliefs is increasingly occupying the center stage. In a way, "wanting to be right" or "being right" supplants "doing right" from its pivotal place as the true measure of a living, vibrant, and diffusive faith. The issue here is not the content of belief and more about the manner in which such belief is held—usually inflexibly, insistently, and idolatrously. And as history so clearly has shown us, this has resulted in indifference and disengagement with the world Christians are supposed to serve. Even worse, this obsession towards "wanting or being right" has spawned various forms of violence, abuse, and cruelty directed at those who do not share the same beliefs. The name of God is used to justify these horrific acts.

The main purpose of this book is to reclaim compassion as the pulsating heartbeat of the Christian life. Three related questions serve as a framework for the ensuing discussion, to wit:

1. What role does compassion play in God's economy given the unremitting and ubiquitous nature of human suffering? The religious character of compassion can be described as God's radical response to human suffering. Jesus incarnate and his compassionate heart is God's answer to the cries of the vulnerable, marginalized, and displaced.
2. What are the cognitive and affective underpinnings as well as the physiological and neurological correlates of compassion? The scientific approach taken here highlights the subjective and bodily experience of compassion by carefully delineating its psychological roots and biological markers gleaned from evolutionary psychology and brain science.
3. How might compassion cultivation training nurture and nourish the trait of compassion? What effects might this training have on individuals who stand in the gap or mediate God's compassionate presence amidst a hurting world? The ethical dimension of compassion hinges on mirroring a Christlike character trait of compassion and the nurturance and promotion of pro-social and altruistic behaviors.

These overarching questions are given full treatment in subsequent chapters briefly described below. Chapter 1 deals primarily with the issue of human suffering, which is such a powerful trigger for compassionate response. This issue has already captivated the minds of many—in fact, a slew of books and articles have already been written about it. And rightly so, since the experience of suffering is so immediate, direct, and devastatingly disorienting it demands a theological response. For our purposes, we argue that a compassionate response, at least from a Christian world view, is closely linked to a biblical and theological understanding of human suffering, which this chapter endeavors to expound.

Chapter 2 delves deeply into a particular kind of human suffering that is actually preventable yet so achingly pervasive. It is also a clear distortion of the Christian message. This form of suffering we are talking about is violence and cruelty committed against those considered in the "out-group." Too often, the name of God is used to justify or legitimize this violence.

Chapter 3 makes a hopeful turn and encouraging tone given the nature of the preceding two chapters. The theme of compassion is discussed here more fully from the different yet complementary hermeneutical perspectives of biblical theology, psychology, and brain science. This layered analysis hopes to provide a nuanced and comprehensive approach to compassion that is lacking in current literature. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) and Jesus' Feeding of the Five Thousand (Mark 6:30–44) occupy a central place in this section and they are used as a paradigmatic example of what it means to be compassionate.

Chapter 4 ventures into the role of the mind in initiating, nurturing, and sustaining a life of compassion. This section entails a basic description of the mind and brain and their relationship to each other and delineation of brain areas that mediate the experience of compassion. It also explores how compassion cultivation practices can facilitate changes in the brain (neuroplasticity), and by extension change the person's way of being in the world as well. The foregoing eventuates into an analysis of what it means to have the "mind of Christ" or "the renewing of the mind" and then integrate this with insights gained from brain science.

Chapter 5 translates knowledge extracted from the previous chapters into practical wisdom. This takes the form of a series of interrelated and sequential spiritual exercises that will help nurture and sustain a life of compassion. They complement and support other spiritual disciplines, and are simple and accessible to everyone desiring to partake of the opportunity

to grow the seed of compassion. It begins with an exercise called "Mindful Heart and Mind," which is a general introduction to the practice of mindfulness and contemplation as a necessary ingredient to the cultivation of compassion. This is followed by the exercise called "The Compassionate Heart of God" aimed at remembering and receiving God's manifold acts of compassion, which finds its ultimate expression in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The personal experience of God's compassion through Christ quickens a movement towards self-empathy and compassion—the major focus of "Self-Compassion."

Chapter 6 hones in on extending compassion to others. The first of this series of exercises is called "Compassion For a Loved One" and is designed for someone dear and close to us who is going through a time of pain and suffering. It then moves into the exercise "Compassion for a Neighbor" that brings to mind and heart someone we know (e.g., a friend, fellow believer, co-worker, client, or the like) whose life situation engenders a need for compassion. Having built a stronger foundation and commitment to a life compassion we can now enter into an exercise that is meant for someone whom we differ or have conflict with, and may consider an enemy or threat. The goal of this exercise, called "Compassion for a Challenging Other," is to go beyond differences and into an acknowledgement of their personhood and our commonality with them as fellow human beings on a journey. The last of this series is a practice called "Compassion for All," which as the title implies is about extending compassion to all sentient beings near and far.

These spiritual exercises, though arranged sequentially, can be practiced separately depending on the need of the moment and the unique circumstance of the person. However, it would be best to start in the order in which they are arranged and let oneself be fully immersed in the process and its pattern and then later on select which exercise fits best given a situation at hand. Additionally, we have designed the book in such a flexible way it can be translated or used as a workshop topic or Bible study theme or book study for small groups or classroom use.

Compassionate Presence

As professors, psychotherapists, and parishioners we have seen the many faces of suffering. As human beings we have also been pierced by the rough edges of our own doing and the fallen world we inhabit. Yet in the midst of all that the presence of a compassionate God remains constant—sustaining,

healing, transforming, and reassuring. Though this presence sometimes eludes our conscious awareness and is difficult to discern the fact remains—God's faithful companionship never fails.

In a lavish display of the grace and companionship of God, this compassionate presence often takes on the face of ordinary people whose accompaniment during these dark times is marked by mindful attention, empathic attunement, and a loving desire to relieve such suffering without imposition or intrusion. This commitment to "suffer with another" through concrete acts of mercy and human solidarity incarnates God's compassionate heart in a profoundly personal and compelling manner. Such theological assertion springs from an experiential knowledge of God who in love became flesh and suffered with and on our behalf and who calls us to offer that love and compassion to ourselves and those around us. Isn't that central to our identity? Isn't that what we are here for? That is, to be a people of God bound by love, transformed by love, and compelled to show this love to all without conditions and limits; to offer hospitality to the displaced and different; to stand alongside victims of injustice and inhumane practices; and to awaken those hypnotized by materialism, religious fundamentalism, and self-ism. Indeed, the call to compassionate love is urgent yet immense. However, this is not ours to own and we cannot willfully do it without the agency of God moving in, around, and through us. Our role primarily is to ready ourselves to the task. This little book shows a way to do just that.

Chapter One

Compassion and Suffering

It was Friday morning, November 8, 2013, when news about the devastating and life-negating effects of Typhoon Haiyan in Tacloban, Philippines reached the comfort of our homes in Canada. Images of a city reduced to rubble of shattered dwellings and dreams, lifeless bodies and displaced survivors, flattened infrastructures and concerned rescuers splashed on our TV screen. Chaos blanketed the city and suffering of all kinds is etched on the faces of those who survived Haiyan. We sat in our living room aghast at what we saw and simultaneously grieved with the Filipinos whose lives were turned upside down by nature's wrath. Immediately after the typhoon had waned, we learned of the overflowing display of kindness and support that came flooding from all over the world to help survivors rebuild their lives anew.

Sophia, a fifty-five-year-old woman, walked into her therapist's office visibly distraught and defeated. Her face looked haggard and her voice started to quiver as she narrated her marital woes. Her husband of thirty years carried on an affair with his co-worker for almost a year, she confessed with great sadness and pain. Burdened with raging and conflicting emotions, she launched into a litany of questions and gestures that revealed a heart that was wounded and shattered into pieces. Her sense of confidence as a woman and lover was shaken and the future of their marriage now uncertain. Sophia's cry of anguish and desperation has evoked a need for gentle therapeutic accompaniment and compassionate response in her therapist.

The news about the gruesome murder of Tina Fontaine, a fifteen-year-old teenager from the Sagkeeg First Nation, and the brutal sexual assault of sixteen-year-old Rinelle Harper in the fall of 2014 have cast a glaring

spotlight on the persistent problem of racism in Winnipeg and Canada as a whole. The violence committed against these two young aboriginal women and the continuing onslaught of racist comments hurled at First Nations people reveal the depth of intolerance and racism embedded in the collective psyche of this supposedly progressive and inclusive country. Yet against this dark and gloomy backdrop was a beacon of light in the form of a community coming together at a vigil to show its support and declare its commitment to work against all forms of racism and discrimination.

These are just a few stories of suffering that are eerily familiar and evocative, and come to us with disconcerting regularity. The sight and sound of individuals in excruciating pain contained in these stories break through the armor of illusory separation and break open an intense desire to help, to intervene, and to make a difference. Compassion is its name and it is triggered when we bear witness to the suffering of another. This response is at the heart of Christianity. It is rooted in the incarnation of Christ, which made visible the depth of God's love, solidarity, and intimate regard for humanity. It is also part of who we are as beings created in the image of God who is full of compassion and love.

The religious character of compassion opens up a way of addressing the issue of human suffering, which leads the question of the sovereignty and goodness of God. Why is there so much suffering in the world? If God is love, good, and powerful, why does God let suffering continue? These burning questions are often raised by many a Christian who tries to make sense of the ubiquitous and debilitating nature of suffering in their lives. And sadly, the answers often given are full of platitudes or guilt-inducing or run-on statements in defense of God.

What follows is neither an attempt to explain suffering away nor will it try to quickly justify suffering as a means to some higher and loftier end. Instead, this theological reflection endeavors to identify the cause of suffering and the unique role that compassion play in addressing this problem. Before we proceed, though, it is important to say at this juncture that we are mindful of the limits of words in describing, let alone easing, the pain and suffering of another. However, we hope that this theological excursus will help illumine and inform the path of compassion we all are called to take and inspire us to come alongside people who are desperately looking to find meaning out of the chaos and disorientation that suffering brings. In this journey of faithful companionship, concrete acts of compassion are usually coupled with and most acutely experienced when offered in comforting

silence, coupled with quiet reassurance that sufferers are not alone in this painful process. At least, this has been our own experience when providing accompaniment in therapy and also when on the receiving end of this same gesture of concern from others.

Suffering and the Problem of Evil

One cannot really talk about suffering without touching on the age-old problem of evil that many a theologian, biblical scholar, and philosopher has grappled with over the centuries. Evil and human suffering cross paths in dire situations and they often leave a scar no balm can quickly soothe. Yet, no matter how intertwined they are, a distinction needs to be made between human suffering and the problem of evil to avoid collapsing these realities into one and the same thing—e.g., suffering *as* evil.

We begin by addressing the problem of evil. Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD), an early Christian theologian and philosopher, claims that evil is the corruption or rejection of good. It does not exist in its own right, like there is an evil force dueling it out with a benevolent entity for dominion and supremacy, but instead is "parasitic on something good."[1] Of course, this does not really explain why evil exists in the first place. Instead, it refutes the dualistic idea that there are "two equally ultimate principles behind good and evil" which "makes it more and more difficult to affirm equally ultimate powers independent of God, thus compromising his omnipotence."[2] Simply put, a doctrine of God's sovereignty precludes the presence of another malevolent force that exists apart from God and that can threaten God's sovereignty over all creation (Isa 45:6–7).

Human suffering is the exact opposite of good. We are not talking about the good or value that may come out of suffering, though that is certainly possible and consequential at times. We are talking about the physical and mental suffering that evil, as a corruption of good, brings about. In most cases this corruption is engineered by human beings whose propensity to tarnish and taint the good is awfully rampant and often unbridled. But as we know, that is not the only cause of human suffering that we see around us. Equally ominous and intractable is the suffering inflicted by forces of nature that can claim thousand of lives in an instant. As we can see, human beings are besieged either by the choices of others or

1. "Augustine on Evil"
2. Hebblethwaite, *Evil, Suffering and Religion*, 44–45.

themselves (moral evil) and the seemingly capricious nature of the natural world (natural evil). Regardless of the source, though, the impact remains the same—human beings suffer greatly often beyond what they can bear—and the need for a compassionate response remains urgent.

Human suffering can be traced back partly to the moral evil that pervades reality. By *moral evil* we mean the "wickedness of human beings . . . this is, evil that is seen in things that are said and done, things that are perpetrated, caused, exploited, by human action or inaction."[3] The story of Sophia vivifies what this means in concrete terms. Her husband has willfully strayed from his commitment to remain faithful to her by engaging in an extramarital affair with his co-worker. This has resulted in marital discord that led to a temporary separation immediately after he was confronted. The psychological impact this had on Sophia was so severe she needed to undergo weekly therapy sessions. She was deeply hurt and was tormented by images of her husband in bed with another woman. She had lost confidence in herself as a person and lover and started to blame herself for her husband's indiscretion. Her defeated demeanor, bouts of crying, and debilitating fear of losing her marriage pervaded her time in therapy. In this story, we see that the good inherent in the marriage is now corrupted by someone's wayward choice.

On a larger scale we are also assaulted everyday by horrifying news of suffering wreaked by human beings whose moral compasses have gone awry, are fractured, or are seemingly nonexistent at times, in the case of antisocial behavior. Take the case of the two teenagers in Winnipeg who suffered horribly, even fatally for one of them, because of their gender and ethnicity. The blood that courses through their veins made them easy targets for perpetual racism and discrimination, leaving them feeling unsafe, profiled, and violated in their own land. There are countless other stories of this nature from other people of different ethnic or racial backgrounds. The good that is inherent in cultural and racial diversity is corrupted by a distorted view that sameness needs to be upheld and defended and difference is a threat that needs to be avoided or punished.

The picture gets worse when we turn our eyes to the history of the Christian church, which is replete with stories of unspeakable acts often executed either in the name of God or by those who claim to be followers of God. In fact, strands of the contemporary church continue to be implicated in numerous accounts of religious violence and cruelty committed against

3. Wright, *The God I Don't Understand,* 30.

those who fall outside or in opposition to their truth claims. Often the commitment to dogma results in some being excluded or ostracized, and even seriously harmed or violated. We will look at this expression of moral evil more closely in Chapter 2.

A close reading of passages such as Psalm 5:6; Isaiah 31:2; Micah 2:1; Job 34:10; 2 Samuel 10:12; Mark 10:18; and Luke 18:19 offers a radically different picture of God[4] than those held by individuals whose actions contribute to evil and suffering in the world. Unfortunately, the message of God's compassion and God's call to be compassionate to all recede into the background. What tends to take center stage and therefore accorded with utmost importance is dogma or "right belief" as opposed to doing what is right.

From a theological standpoint moral evil ultimately links back to humanity's continuing rebellion against God or the perversion of will that is turned against God.[5] It is God who sets the parameters of what is good—"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Deut 10:12; Luke 10:27). When human beings assert themselves against the revealed will of God (Exod 20:3–11; Deut 5:7–15; Matt 22:37–40; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27), or when love of self is cut off from the love of God and love of neighbor, evil and suffering inevitably ensues. But what has instigated this desire to overthrow God from God's rightful place and put self in the throne instead?

Here lies the difference between moral evil and sin nature. Sin can be described in two ways—factual and actual. We all are born into a state of rebellion, alienation, and estrangement from God (Rom 3:23) and therefore vulnerable to betraying and rejecting God's will and intentions for our lives. This sinful nature gets actualized through the moral evil we commit against each other, personally and corporately conceived. Moral evil "finds its roots in the disobedience, whether deliberate or accidental, premeditated or unpremeditated . . . to the will of God, and as such becomes associated with generic sin and virtually synonymous with wickedness."[6] This wickedness yields fruits of suffering that hems us in from all sides. Thankfully, we can be freed from the shackles of sin that enslaves us (Rom 6:6) and therefore need not suffer in perpetuity. God's radical response to

4. Elwell, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 219.
5. Hebblethwaite, *Evil, Suffering and Religion,* 57.
6. Elwell, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Theology,* 222.

this is an outpouring of unconditional love and compassion embodied in the incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ (Rom 5:8, 15) who in turn calls his followers to love without limits or conditions and to show compassion to all (Eph 4:32, Phil 2:1, Col 3:12, 1 Pet 3:8).

The other category of evil is called *natural evil*, which renders most, if not all, of its victims feeble and paralyzed at its sheer power and seeming randomness. It can strike anywhere anytime, often without warning. It does not discriminate and it brings in its wake excruciating pain and suffering at the loss of lives, properties, identities, and meaning that cannot be linked or referenced to human will.[7] The tsunami that hit Thailand in 2004, the magnitude nine earthquake which then unleashed a tsunami in Japan in 2011, and Typhoon Haiyan that made landfall in the Philippines in 2013 are devastating examples of the unpredictable and often fatal properties of the natural world. The scope of devastation and the senseless deaths of many elicit a cry of protest—"Why does God allow such horrific suffering?"—so loud it renders us bereft of speech but not without any means to alleviate it.

There is another kind of suffering that feels justified and necessary at times. Suffering as divine punishment, testing, and discipline is perhaps the most common form of suffering that is "peculiar to God's people."[8] It is peculiar because it's purposeful, that is, the suffering that God metes out transforms God's children in myriad ways as shown in such passages as Hebrews 12:5–12:

> In your struggle against sin you have not resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as children? It says, "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his child." Endure hardships as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate children at all. Moreover, we have all had parents who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! Our parents disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No

7. Hebblethwaite, *Evil, Suffering and Religion,* 52.

8. Carson, *How Long, O Lord,* 64.

> discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Therefore strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.

God's discipline is meant to help followers of Christ to: 1) combat sin (v. 4); 2) see it as an expression of God's love and as a source of encouragement to those who desire genuinely to please the Father (v. 5–9); 3) recognize that it is for our own good and as a way of sharing in his holiness (v. 10), hence we are called to persevere, endure suffering, and not give up; 4) take it as an identity-affirming experience of our status as God's children (v. 8); 5) accept that it will hurt and to rest in the assurance that those who embrace God's discipline with endurance will yield fruits of righteousness and peace (v. 11).[9] Instances where God disciplines his children are plentiful—from being engulfed by plagues and illnesses to personal losses to outright punishment and rebuke—and its effect always painful.

And then there is Job, whose suffering seems undeserved and incomprehensible. In the story, we witness "irrational evil, incoherent suffering"[10] descend upon Job who has been described as "blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8; cf. 1:2; 2:3). As the stories goes, Job, stupefied by what has befallen him, laid bare his heart in protest (Job 30:16–21).

> And now my life ebbs away; days of suffering grip me. Night pierces my bones; my gnawing pains never rest. In his great power God becomes like clothing to me; he binds me like the neck of my garment. He throws me into the mud, and I am reduced to dust and ashes. "I cry out to you, God, but you do not answer; I stand up, but you merely look at me. You turn on me ruthlessly; with the might of your hand you attack me."

Here is a man questioning, lamenting, and protesting not God's power but God's justice in a profound, penetrating, and deeply personal way. Yet, his protests seem to have fallen on deaf ears. God seems out of reach, detached and unmoved by his cry of anguish and tormented soul. There is only silence and Job is left to bathe in his own tears of sorrow and pain. God's silence appears less mysterious and more malicious, it seems.

Then his friends came along with the intention to provide comfort and accompaniment. For a while they sat with him without uttering any

9. Ibid., 64–66.

10. Ibid., 136.

words, muted perhaps by the depths of Job's suffering. But as we later find out, that is short-lived for they hastily made a case that his suffering was evidence of guilt. Expectedly, this only fuels Job's indignation towards God and his "despair becomes an emotional indictment of God, blaming God with indifference—if not hostility—to the unjust suffering of innocent beings"[11] like him.

Unbeknownst to Job, there is actually a backstory behind this and a message that is difficult to decipher. According to the narrative, his suffering came about as a result of a transaction happening elsewhere between God and Satan. God has granted Satan permission to inflict Job with misfortunes, intolerable suffering, and incalculable losses—the point of which was hidden from him.

Towards the end of the narrative (Job 38–42), still no encouragement or explanation was given. Instead, we encounter a litany of questions and pronouncements that only "highlights the hidden character of God's wisdom in the world," [12] a wisdom that Job needs to grapple with on his own and must surrender. This submission came in the form of repentance for "his arrogance in impugning God's justice," [13] and unbelief in God's sovereignty and goodness. But as the story reaches its climax we witness God restoring Job beyond measure not as a reward so as to affirm the doctrine of retribution, nor was it a recompense for his faithfulness under extreme testing. This restoration was offered simply as a gift.

Job's innocent and meaningless suffering discloses that there "remain some mysteries to suffering . . . to exercise faith in the God who graciously revealed himself to us"[14] in love and compassion. This foreboding sense of ambiguity inherent in the suffering that we sometimes experience lures us to stand on the promise of God's quiet accompaniment holding us together as we are lurched to and fro by the storms of life (1 Cor 10:13).

It also encourages us to take a radical step beyond doubt and unbelief and to throw ourselves unreservedly into the loving embrace of a compassionate God "who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt."[15] God breaks through the veil of our suffering and offers his grace and promise of compassionate companionship.

11. Beker, *Suffering and Hope*, 38.
12. Ibid., 39.
13. Carson, *How Long, O Lord,* 153.
14. Ibid.
15. Tillich, *The Courage To Be*, 190.

To sum up our discussion so far, human suffering emerges from a host of sources—from the choices that we or other people make (moral evil) to the suffering induced by natural disasters (natural evil). It can also be inflicted as God's way of disciplining us or as a result of God's own choosing whose reasoning and meaning may elude us. Yet amidst all this we are not left unaided or abandoned. God knows the suffering that people bear to the extent that he intentionally enters into the "structures of his creation [to bear] the brunt of the world's evil himself to the point of crucifixion."[16] That is compassion in action driven by God's great love for humanity and embodied more fully in the person of Jesus Christ. The dark shadow of suffering is kissed with the light of God's compassion.

Suffering and the Body of Christ

God, who is *apart from* (transcendence) and *a part of* (immanence) the world he created, is active and intimately involved in shaping human history to move towards a particular desired end.[17] Realized historically through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the "pivot of human history, the central point of revelation and redemption,"[18] this movement involves "the gradual fashioning of a world of persons, whose perfection will be realized only in ultimate future"[19] when the Lord Almighty reigns (Rev 19:5–7). We come in hopeful anticipation that when he returns in glory this promised perfection entails that all suffering will finally come to an end.

> He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new." (Rev 31:4–5)

Integral to this salvation history is the active calling and fashioning of a people from disparate backgrounds and constituting them to be the body of Christ as a "vehicle of God's special providence in the world."[20] The church mediates God's providence through concrete acts of mercy, justice, and

16. Ibid., 67.
17. Hebblethwaite, *Evil, Suffering and Religion,* 85.
18. Ibid., 86.
19. Ibid., 54.
20. Ibid.

compassion, which subverts the negating power of sin and offers people hope, healing, and transformation.

To keep this calling fresh for the church, the gift of the Lord's Supper is enjoined a confessional proclamation—Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again! This liturgical acclamation is a way of bringing into the present moment the manifold benefits and cosmic significance of the passion, death, resurrection, and the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When we enter into and participate in this communal celebration we acknowledge with deep gratitude and thanksgiving God's display of unconditional love for us all. Compassion emerges from this vast, expansive, and inclusive love of God. God knows our human predicament—the power of sin that destroys, distorts, and deceives and the suffering it brings—and out of his love and compassion has reached out from the heavens, became flesh and dwelt among us, and gave his life for us.

> He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely, he took our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep have gone astray, each of us turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isa 53:3–6)

This is the ultimate expression of God's compassion, symbolized compellingly in the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the cup. The word "compassion" means to "suffer with," which is taken from Latin word *com* (or together) and *pati* (to suffer). The verses just considered describe in great detail the extent to which Jesus Christ, the Suffering Servant, showed his compassion. He took upon himself "our pain and bore our suffering, he was pierced for our transgression and crushed for our iniquities" (vv. 4–5), and through this he brought comfort and hope by trumping and triumphing over sin and death and being offered as new life (2 Cor 5:17; Rom 6:4). The bread represents Christ's body broken for the world and the cup his blood spilled in sacrifice on our behalf. These religious symbolisms make concrete and visible God's self-giving love, revealed profoundly in the incarnation of Christ (John 3:16), the object of ritual worship and paradigmatic example of compassion.

Compassion and Suffering

The gathered community around the table provides the impetus for members of the body of Christ to commune with each other in the name of their Lord. Sharing in one loaf and drinking from the common cup rallies the people of God in all times and all places in all levels of social, economic, and political life (Matt 5:23ff; 1 Cor 10:16ff; 1 Cor 11:20–22; Gal 3:8) to promote "justice, truth, and unity" as well as "human personality and dignity."[21] For this to happen, the church needs to be "broken" itself in the sense of putting away its selfish ambitions, prejudices, and differences and offering itself in the service of others. Doing so, it shows compassion for those in the throes of suffering, darkness, and defeat.

This message is captured fully in the Apostle Paul's account of the Lord's Supper. Paul's narrative places this celebratory meal within the context of betrayal and disunity in the church at Corinth. The Lord's sacrificial death, his body and the cup given as the new covenant, has reconciled humanity to God, and humanity to itself (Rom 5:10). Ironically, this message of reconciliation has eluded the church Paul addressed, which evidenced selfishness and divisiveness in its communal gathering, an act that rendered it "guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor 11:27).

Instead of breaking bread together as one body of Christ, these Christians allowed themselves to be ruled by their own prejudices and social status, and lacking in compassion they neglected the poor amongst them. The aim of the narrative then is to help the Corinthian church regain its perspective on what the ritual represents to it as the newly constituted Body of Christ.

> For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took the bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you: do this in remembrance of me. The same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Cor 11:23–26)

Through the Lord's sacrificial death humanity is no longer at enmity with God, and through that restored relationship, God gave them the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18) and admonished them to have compassion (Eph 4:32; Phil 2:1; 1 Pet 3:8). In turn, the Lord's Supper must be celebrated in a manner that reflects the spirit of sharing and unity in Christian life

21. *World Council of Churches Faith and Order Paper No. 111*,14.

and faith until he comes again. Reminiscent of the promise in Revelation 31:4–5, the Lord's Supper is also a foreshadowing of a heavenly banquet, which is a "scriptural picture for the enjoyment of salvation in terms of communion with the Lord"[22] that includes an experience of shalom or completeness, peace, harmony, and absence of discord, suffering, and pain.

The contemporary church, sad to say, continues to struggle with the same issue that the Corinthian church suffered from. In fact, it is actually getting worse in that the call for reconciliation and compassion recedes further and further into the background and war over doctrinal issues takes center stage, leaving a trail of division, emotional scars, spiritual abuse, cruelty, and religious violence in its wake. Right belief has become paramount over and against treating persons rightly—as someone who bears the image of God and whom God came and died for—almost to the point of idolatry. When this happens the church fails to fulfill its iconic function and image as a vehicle of God's special providence in the world.

How might we understand this growing fracture that is threatening the spiritual integrity and calling of the Christian church to be the body of Christ "broken and given" to the world as a sign of God's compassionate love to all of humanity? How might we explain the shift away from "treating persons rightly" as the true expression of the religious life to an obsessive emphasis on having the "right belief" that often yields cruelty and religious violence towards those in the "out-group"? These are the questions we will endeavor to explore in the next chapter.

22. Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper*, 153.