

# COVENANT

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## Staying Well-Grounded in the Storm

*Peter answered Jesus, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So, Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"*



More than 25 years ago, I chose this passage from the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 14: 22-33) for my commemorative first Mass cards. It spoke to me then, and it has remained among my most favorite passages in Sacred Scripture. Peter, with all his faith and hopes and good intentions—as one of my good friends would say—was losing it. His anxiety and worry and doubt overwhelmed him, and he began to sink. The strong wind, the high waves, and the stress of it all became too much to handle and he began to sink. What did Jesus do? Did he watch him struggle? Did he check if Peter was worthy of his help? Did he exploit his weakness and vulnerability? Jesus, as the good and loving shepherd he is, reached out to Peter in his need immediately, to pull him to safety—immediately.

These past months, the Coronavirus/COVID-19 storm has been unfolding around us locally and globally and has impacted all of us in various ways. It certainly has felt like a ferocious storm and has caused anxiety, worry, and high levels of stress. In the midst of this storm, it is essential that we allow ourselves to be well-grounded psychologically, spiritually, and emotionally, in order to weather the current storm individually and as a community. In this Spring edition of Covenant, two of Southdown's clinical team members offer spiritual and psychological perspectives that may help in the process of grounding ourselves during a storm—Carol Cavaliere identifies the value of recognizing how the mindful practice of self-compassion can play a significant role in our mental health and resilience, and Greta DeLonghi writes about the importance of identifying the Image of God that is most comforting and reassuring, that is helping us sense God's loving presence and compassionate embrace.

This current storm reminds us of our human condition, our fragility, and our inter-dependence, and it is an opportunity to remember what is truly important in our lives and how we go about living. Let us remind each other of good self-care techniques, such as:

- **Stay informed, but take breaks from watching news stories, including social media.** Identify your most trusted source of information, limit your search to that source, and identify limited times when you check information. Repeated and excessive exposure to information can become overwhelming. Separate facts from fiction.
- **Take care of your body.** Practice mindful breathing, get some fresh air, take a walk, get plenty of sleep, and try to pay attention to your nutrition.
- **Identify your favorite adaptive ways to unwind and relax.** Do what grounds you in healthy ways and do more of it!

- **Connect with others.** While practicing social distancing, find ways to meaningfully connect with loved ones, friends, and foster a sense of community, even if it is a virtual community.
- **Talk about your emotions, your fears, your worries.** Connect with trusted others, such as your psychotherapist or your spiritual director, to share honestly what you are going through. Do not blame yourself or judge yourself for whatever it is you are feeling. Our emotions are there for a good reason. Sharing them often lightens the load.

Jesus is present and stands by our side, no matter what storm may be unfolding around or within us, to pull us to safety, to heal us, to embrace us, and to envelope us with grace. I leave you with the words of an inspiring prayer written by Cameron Bellm, a Seattle based mom and Catholic Faithful.

## Prayer for a Pandemic By Cameron Bellm

May we who are merely inconvenienced  
Remember those whose lives are at stake.  
May we who have no risk factors  
Remember those most vulnerable.  
May we who have the luxury of working from home  
Remember those who must choose between preserving their health  
or making their rent.  
May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their  
schools close  
Remember those who have no options.  
May we who have to cancel our trips  
Remember those that have no safe place to go.  
May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the  
economic market  
Remember those who have no margin at all.  
May we who settle in for a quarantine at home  
Remember those who have no home.  
As fear grips our country,  
let us choose love.  
During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around  
each other,  
Let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God to our  
neighbors.  
Amen.

Sincerely,

Rev. Stephan Kappler, Psy.D., C.Psych.  
President and Chief Psychologist

# Grace and Self-Compassion

By Carol Cavaliere



Grace is the assurance that we are loved, exactly as we are. Within this context, there resides the fundamental recognition that humanity is flawed and imperfect, yet worthy of kindness and compassion regardless. This reality is often readily accepted from a spiritual perspective, as we open ourselves up to receive God's mercy and forgiveness. Further, many of us regularly extend such grace to others as we encounter them in their suffering; however, as seen in our clinical work at Southdown, turning this sentiment inward—that is, approaching oneself with compassion in those inevitable moments of suffering and/or failure—does not typically follow as freely. Instead, we can be prone to shame and self-criticism, holding a double standard for how we view ourselves in relation to others.

Such negative self-evaluations can be incredibly detrimental to one's psychological and emotional health and functioning. Furthermore, the inability and/or reluctance to respond compassionately to oneself may also become an impediment to healthy ministry—that is to say, how can we continue to authentically give what we do not have? In order to truly offer compassion to another, we must first be willing to extend this kindness to ourselves.

Put simply, self-compassion involves noticing our own suffering, and responding to this pain with warmth, sympathy and non-judgement (Neff, 2003). It is most applicable when we experience distress stemming from a situation outside of our control or one in which we encounter our own flaws or limitations. According to Neff (2003), self-compassion is comprised of three core components:

1. **Self-kindness**—taking a gentle, understanding and non-judgmental stance towards oneself in the face of suffering or perceived failure.
2. **Common humanity**—acknowledging our pain and sense of inadequacy as part of the shared human experience, as opposed to feeling isolated and “bothered” by it.
3. **Mindfulness**—maintaining an awareness of painful thoughts and feelings without getting caught up in them (i.e., over-identifying with them).

Self-compassion appears to play a significant role in mental health and resilience, and it may also act as a buffer against psychopathology; in fact, research has identified self-compassion as being more critical than self-esteem in promoting overall

wellness (Leary et al., 2007). However, it is essential to distinguish self-compassion from other response patterns that do not carry a similar benefit. For example, self-compassion is not akin to self-pity—that is, the tendency to become immersed in one's own personal suffering, without adequate appreciation of common humanity, as described above. Similarly, self-compassion differs from self-indulgence, such that the kindness extended inward is not intended to justify maladaptive or self-destructive behaviour (e.g., binge eating, substance abuse).

Such distinctions are crucial, as they serve to address common misconceptions related to self-compassion—namely, the fear that receiving grace and self-compassion will promote an attitude of passive resignation with respect to personal development. Yet, research indicates that the opposite appears to be true; for example, Leary and colleagues (2007) found that the gentle and non-judgemental qualities of self-compassion allowed people to acknowledge their role in difficult life experiences without becoming overwhelmed by the negative emotions that accompanied these events. So, self-compassion may facilitate growth and development as it creates a relatively non-threatening environment in which we may openly encounter our perceived

weaknesses and begin to learn from them.

Towards this end, Neff and Germer (2018) identify two distinct self-compassionate approaches: being with ourselves versus acting in the world. The former is what most people think of when we consider what it is to be compassionate; that is, providing comfort, soothing and validation in the face of difficult realities. The latter is what Neff and Germer (2018) characterize as “fierce” self-compassion—movement to protect or provide for oneself through assertiveness or other proactive response patterns. In this way, self-compassion involves both a willing acceptance of that which is unchangeable, as well as an action to change whatever may be amenable to it. In this way, it is an act of self-compassion to work to ensure one's needs are met, or to develop the ability to say “no.”

Considered in this way, self-compassion and grace are complementary. Embracing the concept of grace—the idea that we are fundamentally good and worthy of kindness and acceptance, despite our faults and missteps—can empower us to greater self-compassion. Growing in our ability to extend such grace inwardly is a true gift—not only to ourselves, but to those to whom we minister as well. ■

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## Annual Benefit Dinner 2020 – Update

Southdown is closely monitoring the ongoing Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. As the situation continues to rapidly evolve, we are taking informed actions and following best practices to limit the spread of COVID-19. While our priority remains the health, safety and well-being of our residents and staff, we are also aware of our role in mitigating the impact of COVID-19.

Therefore, out of an abundance of caution, we have decided to cancel the Southdown Annual Benefit Dinner 2020 as scheduled for May 14, 2020. This decision was based on the recommendations by public health experts for social distancing measures to minimize close contact with others in the community at events such as our Annual Benefit Dinner. As an organization that works in the promotion of health and wellness, it became imperative for us to proactively support the efforts to limit the spread of COVID-19.

And, even though we are not gathering in person this year, we would still encourage you to consider making a donation in support of our important work of emotional, spiritual, and mental healing for Clergy and Vowed Religious who reach out to us in their time of need. We will soon reach out to you again with an invitation to save the date for our Annual Benefit Dinner 2021.

## Image is (Almost) Everything By Greta Delonghi



A wise spiritual director pointed out to me many years ago that when the risen Jesus says to Mary Magdalene in John 20:17, “Do not cling to me,” He may be cautioning us not to hold on too tightly to any particular image of God, indicating that no one image of God can hold all of God.<sup>1</sup> It awakened me to pay attention to my images of

God. And yes, *deus semper major* – God is always greater – but I have since learned that so much depends on having images of God that are authentic and free of distortions. It matters not only for ourselves personally but for the life of the entire Church, and that God works through our imaginations to heal those images and bring us to a fullness of life in relationship.

As a spiritual director at Southdown, I am enjoined to “listen for images”<sup>2</sup> because they are operative in people’s lives. We live in a world inundated by images and present ourselves to others through images.<sup>3</sup> Which story I operate out of at any given time and what meaning I make of it has enormous implications for how I live.<sup>4</sup> Garrett Green gives startling examples in the *Faithful Imagination: The Task of Theology*. To imagine myself as a random product of forces of nature, Green writes, or as a member of a master race, or destined to fail at everything I attempt, or as a sinner redeemed from death and hell by the sacrifice of Christ – each calls forth a total response.<sup>5</sup> Contrast Jesus the redeemer with a distorted, “negative” image of God as an uncaring punisher and demander of restitution that leaves people feeling insignificant and unloved.<sup>6</sup> “The God we adore is the God we become,” write authors of *Good Goats: Healing Our Image of God*. As some authors have said, the key to personal and social healing is healing our image of God.<sup>7</sup>

The work of spiritual direction is to help people to become conscious of the contents of their imagination, including distortions in their images of God and self, and to identify authentic concepts and symbols.<sup>8</sup> For example, I often hear distortions in images of Jesus – “forgetfulness” of either His authentic humanity or His divinity and power, as Gilles Mongeau, S.J., calls it.<sup>9</sup> These distortions can play out in our ministry, says Mongeau. Forgetting Jesus’ humanity results in a loss of sense of human dignity in self and others and a failure to hear the cry of the poor. Forgetting His divinity, on the other hand, results in a failure to recognize God’s action in our lives and having an “impoverished” understanding of the roles and fruits of Christian ministry in the world. We need to preach “the whole Christ.”<sup>10</sup>

Our cultural and family experiences and values shape our image of God and impact our spiritual attitudes. A “deeply skewed male value system” in our culture that over-emphasizes dominance, control and competition, and in which there are clear winners and losers, can lead to approaching Scripture literally, say the writers of *Good Goats*, and integrating “feminine” values would help. Consider the image of God as mother in Is. 49:15: “Even should she forget you, I will never forget you.” God is not literally a father or mother, but loving mothers and fathers equally reflect the image of God.<sup>11</sup>

Knowing and contemplating authentic images of God from Biblical and Christian tradition helps “to ensure no further psychic oppression,” says John English in *Spiritual Freedom*.<sup>12</sup> And by contemplating I mean “not a deep mystical experience, but rather the kind of relationship with God in whom you are able to notice what God is like, and what God is doing, be affected by it, notice how one is affected and respond to God out of that awareness.”<sup>13</sup> At Southdown, residents participate in spirituality groups, contemplate Scripture, art, film, and nature. They use

1 Mary Jo Leddy, *The Other Face of God: When the Stranger Calls Us Home* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011) p.7 (check this). It is a very ancient biblical belief that God is always more than our thought of God, writes Mary Jo Leddy in *The Other Face of God*: “Again and again the prophets reminded the people that God is not an idol, the work of our hands and our imaginations.”  
2 John English, SJ, *Spiritual Freedom* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1995, p. 245.  
3 *Ibid.*, 239.  
4 Sandra Levy, “Concluding Thoughts: Imagination and the Making of Meaning” in *Imagination and the Journey of Faith*, pp. 160-175, p. 171.  
5 Garrett Green, “The Faithful Imagination: The Task of Theology” (pp. 126-152 plus fn in his *Imagining God*) p. 151.  
6 Linn, Dennis, Fabricant Linn, Sheila, Linn, Matthew. *Good goats: Healing Our Image of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994) p. 14.  
7 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

8 English, 243. English says the Spiritual Exercises are a way of helping retreatants become conscious of these images.  
9 Mongeau, Gilles, S.J. “The Human and Divine Knowing of the Incarnate Word” in *Josephinum Journal of Theology*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (winter/spring 2005). p 42.  
10 *Ibid.*, p. 42.  
11 Linn, p. 42-43.  
12 English.  
13 Kathleen McAlpin, *The Value of Theological Reflection Source: Ministry that Transforms: A Contemplative Process of Theological Reflection* (Novalis, 2009), p. 10. quoting Brian McDermott.

practices like *lectio* and *visio divina*, gospel contemplation, and the daily awareness examen. They also reflect theologically on their own experiences, as described by Kathleen McAlpin in her book *Ministry that Transforms*. Unpacking their experiences, exploring their context and putting them into conversation with Biblical and Christian tradition<sup>14</sup> evokes the capacity to know the sacred in lived experience.<sup>15</sup>

Authentic images might not always be quite as comforting, but instead may challenge and invite us to move beyond ourselves to God and others. They shift our desires away from media images of power and violence to images of Joseph and Mary as a helpless couple with their baby or a wounded criminal on a cross – images that do not tend to fulfill the ideals of success in our world: wealth, power, consumption, writes John English.<sup>16</sup> Mary Jo Leddy in *The Other Face of God*<sup>17</sup> writes that cultural values can impact our image of God. The “totalizing” worldview in our culture that tends to enfold the “different” into the “same” leaves us tempted to have a God who is familiar, predictable, and like us. This God is called to protect us from strangers in a time when we fear strangers and foreigners rather than welcome them.<sup>18</sup> Leddy describes God as stranger and less familiar than we think – radically new – the personification of newness.<sup>19</sup> Everything depends – and that includes the future of the Catholic Church – on whether we expect the unexpected and the new. “Once we stop trying to manage the differences of others, we might be taken aback by the fresh gifts they bring and a great new hope,” Leddy writes, reflecting on her experiences working with refugees and newcomers at Romero House in Toronto.<sup>20</sup> If we stay with the newcomer long enough, they lead us to a new sense of the nearness of God – to affection and friendship and the companionship of God: “Living in the shelter of each other, we begin to live in the neighbourhood of God.”<sup>21</sup>

14 Ibid., 10.

15 Ibid., 76.

16 English, 240.

17 Leddy, quoting St. Augustine, she describes God as “nearer to me than I am myself but different enough to make me more than myself,” p. 7.

18 Ibid., 5-6.

19 Ibid., 8.

20 Ibid., 7.

21 Ibid., 8.

We can lean on the power of God to help heal our images of God. We are invited to imagine this God of power in an unexpected way – not as a *deus ex machina*, writes Garrett Green, but as a “God of weakness” who presents Himself to the world as a story. “God captures the imagination of the faithful in story – the only conquest that leaves them free,” says Green.<sup>22</sup> In his parables, Jesus invites us, like the God of weakness, to imagine ourselves as the Samaritan encountering a robbed and beaten stranger or as a merchant who finds a precious pearl to bring them to bear on our present situation.<sup>23</sup>

To be moved by mercy, like the Samaritan, means entering “into the chaos of their situation.” And in doing so, we are participating in God, in that every action of God is aimed at rescuing us from chaos, writes James F. Keenan. Creation, crucifixion, and redemption promise to deliver us from the cross of our lives.<sup>24</sup> Everything – absolutely everything – turns on the exercise of mercy, Sobrino said, and mercy is not just a feeling, but a structured activity of love. It was a fundamental trait of early Christianity, an urban movement with many strangers in large cities treated hospitably by Christians. It was opposed to the moral climate of society that viewed mercy as “weak.” There was, as a result, “an expanded sense of family.”<sup>25</sup> We too are called to be a “Good Samaritan Church”, as Sobrino called it.<sup>26</sup>

And so we look to heal our images of God not merely for the sake of holding authentic images such as this, but for being in and living out of such authentic relationship with God and each other. ■

22 Green, 147 English also talks about transformation as depending on a change in our relationship to the symbols in our imagination. Symbols, images and story dictate the way we grasp and express change. John Henry Cardinal Newman, quoted by English, called the imagination an instrument that brings us to commitment, that commitment involves the assent of the imagination. “People are moved to act not by notions but by what seizes their imagination ... imagination creates the symbolic present and future state of the person and with grace calls forth transformation.” 242.

23 Ibid., 147.

24 James F. Keenan, S.J., “Radicalizing the Comprehensiveness of Mercy” in *Hope and Solidarity*, p. 197.

25 Ibid. p. 197.

26 Ibid. p. 195.

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