

1) *Can God make a rock so big that even God can't lift it?*

In middle school, clever young sceptics challenged us believers with that perplexing quandary.

Poor God—couldn't win for losing.

MADE that rock, but then couldn't LIFT it? THAT God's not so powerful!

Lifted THAT rock, but couldn't make a BIGGER one? THAT God's not so powerful!

So, IF your God exists at ALL, our classmate sceptics taunted us, YOUR God's a WEAK-LING!

Not having taken a logic course, we didn't see that the problem wasn't God's—

the problem was the question—which, bottom line, is: *CAN God do what God CAN'T do?*

And that's just nonsense—whoever is the subject of the sentence.

It's a bogus question.

But **SOME** quandaries are not so easily dismissed—they pose **VALID**, urgent questions.

Not quandaries about arcane metaphysical abstractions.

But quandaries about moral choices with serious consequences.

2) Today we find Jesus caught, as they say, between a rock and a hard place.

He's faced with a moral dilemma—a choice of either/or.

Not just a choice about His personal priorities.

But a choice requiring that He set aside the legitimate, pressing claims of **SOME** people
for the similar claims of **OTHERS**.

Jesus has responsibilities in conflicting directions.

His quandary **DOES** concern the use of power—but not power in theory, power in practice.

Exceptional powers Jesus may indeed possess; but those can't help Him here.

He can't help everybody, everywhere, all the time, at once.

3) *Come away and rest awhile*, Jesus has told his twelve disciples.

Do they ever need it! They sure deserve it!

They've just returned from a teaching, healing, exorcising trip;

where, under His instructions, they've been doing what (Mark says)

Jesus himself hasn't been able to do in His own home town.

His helpers have worked hard. They need a break. They can't go 24-7 forever.

And, furthermore: if you've ever been an intern, or supervised interns,

you know that stand down time for reflection is critical to better practice going forward.

In calling His disciples away for a time of rest, Jesus—rightly—commits Himself

to their well-being, to their ongoing learning, and to the strategic success of His mission—
the mission of announcing and advancing the Uncommon Commonwealth of God.

So, they all make their way to the retreat center; and look who's there to greet them!
A sea of faces, a cry of voices – wave upon wave of desperate human need –
the very folks on behalf of whom Jesus and his followers
are proclaiming and promoting God's reign of justice, health, and peace.

4) Seeing the gathered crowd, Jesus "feels their pain".

Mark makes clear that this is not just a spontaneous, fleeting, "Oh, what poor people."
His "gut is wrenched," Mark says. This is, for Jesus, profoundly personal.

But, presumably, He feels no LESS a compassion connection with His chosen followers;
otherwise he would not have brought them out for recuperation and reflection.

As a moral ideal, compassion can be blanket commended for all who need it.

But when it comes down to cases, compassion can't be simultaneously invested everywhere—
no matter who you are—no matter how much power you may have.

Jesus faces a conflict of duties.

It sounds like, in proclaiming God's Kingdom, He's attempting an enterprise not so different—
but far more important—than trying to make a rock bigger than He can lift.

5) As the story unfolds, it seems clear at first that Jesus makes the hard call—
to sacrifice the commitment to his disciples for a commitment to the crowds.

(If I were one of those chosen twelve, that's surely how I'd see it.)

But while compassion in practice may not be a resource without limit;
perhaps it doesn't necessarily have to be a zero-sum game either.

Compassion can sometimes be expressed simultaneously
to those with particular—distinctive—even divergent needs.

When the retreat space intended for the disciples is overrun by all those shepherd-less sheep,
Jesus conveys His compassion by "teaching them many things"—
things that his disciples listen to and learn from as well.

He has already deliberately exposed them to the coming and going of all who clamor for His care.

This care-giving team has been so inundated, in fact, that they've had "no leisure even to eat."
They suffer serious hunger pangs—and when they do, they get a vivid, visceral lesson
in the kind of gut-wrenching compassion that Jesus has for everyone—
the kind of compassion He wants to nurture in those disciples.

He doesn't want them just to help others out; He wants his disciples to IDENTIFY with others.

You don't know how it FEELS for OTHERS to be hungry, unless YOU'VE been hungry.

Now the disciples do—and they show that their compassion education is starting to take hold.
Having taught the crowds all day, Jesus is on a roll—he might well keep on holding forth all night.
His disciples tactfully suggest that it just might be time to give His listeners a supper break.

This lesson in compassion learned leads to another.

Jesus encourages them to ACT on their compassion by feeding the crowd—
employing the bread and fish resources ready to hand.

A rest break, a strategic retreat—that, for the disciples, would have been a very good thing.

But, granted the sudden change of circumstances,

Jesus finds a way to further extend the compassion training He wants to give them anyway.

- 6) What implications might this have for us who seek to follow Jesus in the Way of Compassion—
especially when the road signs seem to point in different directions?

Let me pose a few for our consideration:

- 1) We MAY sometimes need to set aside one set of responsibilities for another.

Our duties are wedded to our roles; and those, to some degree, are different for each of us.

So no unvarying, universal rules for resolving conflicts of duty can be laid down.

We observe, investigate, reflect, consult, pray, discern, decide, and act as best we can.

And in so doing, we learn compassion for others in similar struggles,
who also have to make hard calls.

- 2) Not every moral conflict, however, is so utterly intractable—few, in fact, are fully so.

How might we orchestrate values and commitments that are in tension?

THIS question is critical—especially in a polarized and polarizing culture

that seems more and more driven to regard moral choices as absolute EITHER/OR's.

What would have happened, had Jesus shrugged and told the crowd:

Sorry, compassion is a fine ideal, but not on offer for you today.

My time is spoken for—disciples win, you lose—too bad.

What message would Jesus have sent His disciples had he issued an analogous dismissal:

Sorry, you get compassion if and only if nobody else shows up who needs it.

You're only instruments of my compassion distribution;

not the focus of my compassion yourselves.

In moral conflicts, Jesus shows that compassion can generate creative decision-making.

- 3) Compassion isn't a spontaneous expression of generous feeling—a GO FUND ME impulse.

Compassion is moral artistry—a discipline developed in practice, over time, in community.

Hence the extended, sequential training sessions through which Jesus leads his followers.

- 4) Being serious about compassion inevitably requires sacrifice.

The strategic decision-making we followers of Jesus undertake is not “the art of the deal”—
give only what you MUST to get all that you CAN.

Compassion does involve clear awareness of our own legitimate needs—
but for the explicit purpose of putting ourselves—empathetically and imaginatively—
self-consciously but unselfishly—in the place of others.

What would happen, say, in Congress if, rather than routinely defaulting to their own base;
legislators sought to identify with the genuine concerns of their opposing base?

- 5) When we face moral choices between conflicting claims,
compassion can seem an added, undue burden.

But going in with the assumption that “The choice is only EITHER/OR”
can quickly turn moral reasoning into a contest of “winner take all”—
generating ever-escalating burdens of proof—
as each side keeps trying to make its own case—
a case that’s a rock bigger than the other side can lift.

- 6) Last, but most important:

For Jesus, compassion is essential—but it is directed not ultimately or even primarily
Toward the reconciling of duties, claims, and principles;
but (as the Letter to the Ephesians eloquently affirms today)
the compassion of Jesus is focused on reconciling PERSONS and COMMUNITIES.

For us, Jesus serves not just as an example or an inspiration,
but as a source of spiritual energy.

For Him, the Way of Compassion is, in the end, the Way of the Cross,
a Way that is, for us, the Way of Life and Peace.

HAVING BEEN, by His compassion, reconciled to God;
you and I are commissioned and empowered—
even in settings fraught with moral conflict—
as compassionate, creative agents of God’s reconciliation

When have you been—where are you now—in situations of moral conflict—
called to serve with compassion as an agent of that reconciliation?

How might your fellow member in the Body of Christ sustain you in that ministry?