



Loving Truth Bombs  
Sermon by Pastor Sarah Rohde  
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, St. Charles  
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I've listened to a few podcasts this winter that interview the author and therapist, Lori Gottlieb. Lori has written the best-seller, *Maybe you should talk to someone*, in which she basically invites readers into a therapist's office, allows us to be interlopers on the kinds of conversations that happen in therapy. In more than one interview, I've heard her draw from the Buddhist tradition in deciphering between two kinds of compassion: idiot compassion and wise compassion.

Idiot compassion, she writes, "is when you avoid rocking the boat to spare people's feelings, even though the boat needs rocking. People do this all the time," she says, "with teenagers, spouses, addicts, friends. It's a way of trying to be supportive while avoiding honesty that might hurt." The opposite of this is *wise compassion*, which she says means "caring about the person to such an extent that you're willing to give him or her a loving truth bomb when it's needed." (Gottlieb, *Maybe you should talk to someone*)

Now we all know the people we can go to for idiot compassion, and thank God for them, right? They're the people who are always willing to commiserate, always ready to attend the pity party we're throwing for ourselves, the people who are just going to tell us what we want to hear. These are the people who help us feel validated in whatever we're feeling.

But we also need people who are going to practice wise compassion toward us, the people who are willing to toss us a loving truth bomb when it's needed. These are the people who will tell you they're concerned about you; these are the people who hold you accountable; these are the people who will puncture your

temptation to settle in something that's unhealthy by helping you see options you actually have.

Wise compassion doesn't always feel compassionate. It's often pretty uncomfortable, and we're never quite ready to receive it. It's so much easier to stay in what we know, even when it's tearing us up inside or tearing our world apart, than it is to step into a world we do not yet know. And yet wise compassion is a pretty remarkable gesture of love, in that it shows someone's willingness to risk something in order to love us into better, healthier versions of ourselves.

I thought about that phrase, "a loving truth bomb" as I read the gospel passage this week. In this passage, we see Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry, at least as John tells it, kicking it off in no uncertain terms with a truth bomb and shattering the rituals and beliefs of the people around him.

In today's reading, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem. He's there because he's a Jewish man and, like all the other practicing Jews, he's come to Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover. Now a little background here - when Jews of this time celebrated Passover, they journeyed to the temple, as that was the place where they knew God was present. In order to access the temple, they offered animal sacrifices, but this got complicated because, if they had traveled for miles and miles to get to Jerusalem, which is what most people had done, there was no way to arrive at the temple with an unblemished animal.

So they'd arrive at the temple, sell their blemished animal that they'd brought with them, and then use that money, once they'd converted it from Roman coins to temple coins, to then buy a new animal. Now it sounds strange and awfully regulated to us, but these traditions of trading, buying, sacrificing had gone on for thousands of years; these were their traditions around a special holiday, and they went about them the same way you and I go about the traditions that have been handed down to us for celebrating different holidays throughout the year.

So Jesus shows up at the temple and sees this nonchalant buying and trading going on, and Jesus turns angry and violent. He makes quite a scene, really – creating a whip out of cords, he drives out the animals, tosses the coins across the floor, and flips over the tables. And while he’s creating all this mess and chaos, he yells out, “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.”

Now you and I have probably heard this story enough times, and heard it in the other three gospels, that we easily jump to thinking that something was morally wrong, something was corrupt in what Jesus saw happening that day. In the other gospels, Jesus enters the temple and calls it “a den of robbers” but it’s interesting that here, in the gospel of John, he doesn’t say that. Jesus doesn’t seem to be as much upset by the operations of the marketplace, as he is upset that that’s become the primary activity of the temple, that that’s become the entry-point for accessing God.

In this gospel, what’s driving Jesus’ anger is not so much sleazy business practices, but rote and restricted spirituality, a place of worship that’s lost its purpose, its heartbeat. Jesus knows there’s more, he knows there’s more to God and human life lived before God, and he cares about that so much that he can’t help but get fired up and drop a loving truth bomb right into the center of the most religious space, right into the rituals that people knew and loved, in order to wake them up and show them another way. Jesus wanted them to know that the God that they worship is not reduced to a building, that God is not only accessible through specific sacrifice and offerings, but that God resides in the body of Christ and in the grace, love, and welcome that flows from his very being.

This would have been earth-shattering for the Jewish community and leaders to hear. And you can tell that it was – the rest of the passage shows the people around Jesus struggling to comprehend what they’ve just seen and heard. I mean, imagine all they were trying to process... Jesus’ anger, the destruction that he caused in the sanctuary that was most dear to them, his troubling, unsettling words – I mean, they have got to wonder, has this man lost his mind or is he conveying a truth we need to listen to?

I mean that's the tension we feel when truth bombs are dropped into our lives, right?

A part of us wants to just turn away and reject the premise. A part of us wants to pretend we never heard it. A part of us feels defensive – they don't know what they're talking about. And yet my guess is that we can all think of times when we've received words of wise compassion or tough truth, and have allowed them to do their work on us. Even if our initial reaction is one of resistance or rejection, if there's truth in them, if there's compassion in them, those words will hang around and wait for us to be ready. And when we get there, when we're ready to take them in, these are often the words that disrupt our lives in a good way, that lead us to deeper self-understanding, to healthier relationships with those we love, to clarity about what we want our lives to be about.

When we think about our image of Jesus, we are so naturally drawn to Jesus the peacemaker, the gentle teacher, the good shepherd who loves and forgives all... And Jesus is all those things. But Jesus is also a human being that gets angry, Jesus is a disrupter of the status quo and any system that is set up to privilege some and impoverish others, Jesus is an agitator that will not stay quiet or play nice when he confronts practices, traditions, behaviors in people and in communities of faith that are keeping us from who we are called to be.

And so I wonder – have we made room for this Jesus in our lives? Are we willing to let Jesus get angry and disrupt some things – not just the things we know are bad for us, but the things we love, the traditions and lifestyles that we might cherish a little too much? Do we allow Jesus to drop loving truth bombs into our lives, to challenge us and hold us accountable to what we're really about as Christians, as a church?

Barbara Brown Taylor recalls attending a retreat once where the leader asked everyone present to think of someone who represented Jesus Christ in their lives. When it came time to share their answers, one woman stood up and said, "I had to think hard about that one. I kept thinking, 'Who is it who told me the truth

about myself so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?" (Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Perfect Mirror," *The Christian Century*, 1998).

Yes, this is Jesus, too. The God who loves us unceasingly, no matter what we do; and the God who loves us so much that he will not hold back from confronting us with truths that we don't always want to hear, truths that disrupt and discomfort us, but that in the end, have our flourishing and the flourishing of our neighbor as the reason for it all. Jesus doesn't explode in the temple just to create havoc and stir things up; Jesus brings disruption because he wants to wake people up and invite them into a way of experiencing God that is expansive and liberating. And Jesus continues to do this in our lives, too. His love for us nudges us when we've gotten too cozy, it wakes us up as we learn that the peace of our lives is built not on justice but on masking injustice, it confronts us with the way our rituals and activities can sometimes take the place of the mission for which we were all created – to love God and to love neighbor.

As one of my favorite Franciscan benedictions says: "May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers and half truths, so that we may live deep within our hearts. May God bless us with anger at injustice and exploitation, so that we may work for freedom and peace for all."

And I'll add one more - May God bless us with minds that are willing to be challenged, with ears that are willing to hear hard truths, that the journey of faith not be one of numb repetition, but one of zeal and discovery, where we are led to new places and new relationships through the power of God's compassion."

Thanks be to God.  
Amen.