

Compassion: Introduction to Theme
Week One
Middle School (Ages 11-14)

Materials Needed for Compassion “Quilt”: Paper in various colors, rulers, scissors, markers. You’ll also need something on which to mount the squares. Black posterboard works well. Butcher block paper can also be used. If you want to make a fabric quilt, simply use fabric squares and fabric paints. A large piece of black felt works well as a backdrop for fabric squares.

If possible, hang the quilt up in the classroom, and leave it up for the entire unit. Kids can add squares in the future weeks if they want.

Opening Activity: Making “Quilt” Squares

As the kids arrive, have them cut out quilt squares. We have used 5”x5” squares with success, but you can decide what size you want to use, based on the number of kids and the space you have for hanging the quilt.

Give the kids the paper and have them measure the squares and cut them out. This won’t take long. They should make at least 2-3 per person.

Lesson 1: What is Compassion?

Prompt: Our new unit is Compassion. So let’s start by talking about what that word means. What does the word “compassion” mean to you? [Brainstorm/Guess]

Prompt: Can you think of an example when someone acted compassionately? [Share]

Prompt: Can you think of an example when you acted compassionately? [Share]

Prompt: Can you think of an example when you someone acted compassionately toward you? [Share]

Prompt: Can you think of a time when you should have acted compassionately, but didn’t? [Share]

Prompt: Basically, being compassionate means helping others, especially when they are having a hard time. The dictionary definition of compassion is something like...the deep awareness of the suffering of another being *and* the desire to help relieve that suffering.

Prompt: Compassion is a big part of every single major world religion. Can you think of any stories from the Bible that focus on compassion? [Brainstorm/Guess/Share]

Prompt: Over the next several weeks, we’ll be talking about stories from the Bible and other ancient texts where someone was compassionate toward someone else.

Lesson 2: Divine Compassion Toward Us

Prompt: Religions actually talk about different types of compassion. One type of compassion is divine compassion toward humans. We’ll start with the Bible. This passage is from the book of Isaiah. In this passage, God is speaking to the Israelites through a prophet. The prophet is reminding the people that God will not abandon them.

Read: Isaiah 54:7-10 (The Eternal Covenant of Peace)

For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
says the Lord, your Redeemer.

This is like the days of Noah to me:

Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth,
so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you
and will not rebuke you.
For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the Lord who has compassion on you.

Prompt: And this one is from the prophet Micah, another Old Testament prophet. He lived about 700 years before Jesus was born. That's about 2700 years ago. Again, Micah is trying to remind people that God will be compassionate toward them.

Read: Micah 7:18-20 (God's Compassion and Steadfast Love)

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession?
He does not retain his anger forever,
because he delights in showing clemency.
He will again have compassion on us;
he will tread our iniquities under foot.
You will cast all our sins
into the depth of the sea.
You will show faithfulness to Jacob
and unswerving loyalty to Abraham,
as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old.

Prompt: Do you feel like there is some sort of Divine presence that brings compassion to your life?
[Share]

Prompt: When you see someone being compassionate (or when you, yourself, are compassionate), do you think the Divine has anything to do with that? [Share]

Prompt: The Qur'an makes a similar point – that God is compassionate – many, many times. The Bible has chapters, but there is another word we use for the chapters in the Qur'an. Does anyone remember that word? [Tell them or play hangman = surah]

Prompt: There are 114 surahs in the Qur'an. Each one begins with the same sentence. It's sometimes translated into English as:

In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful [2]

Prompt: But some people have translated it as:

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring [3]

Prompt: Having that line at the beginning of every chapter – which means it's in the Qur'an at least 114 times – serves as a constant reminder of God's compassion towards us. We'll come back to the Qu'ran in just a minute.

Lesson 3: Compassion Toward Others

Prompt: So far, we've talked about God/the Divine showing compassion toward us, but it's also important for humans to show compassion toward others. For many Christians, this is the most important lesson we can draw from the life of Jesus. For many Christians, Jesus exemplified the compassionate life. Some of the most obvious examples of Jesus' compassion are found in the healing stories. There are a lot of stories (over 45) about Jesus healing people in the New Testament. Sometimes, they are just different versions of the same story, but there are also some places where the Bible simply says, "And Jesus healed many people there." Here's one example of a healing story that is intended to show Jesus' amazing capacity for compassion. We'll read more examples in the upcoming weeks.

Read: Matthew 20:29-34 (Jesus Heals Two Blind Men)

As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him. There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet; but they shouted even more loudly, "Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!" Jesus stood still and called them, saying, "What do you want me to do for you?" They said to him, "Lord, let our eyes be opened." Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.

Prompt: As you might expect, other religions also talk about compassion toward others. This passage is from the Bhagavad Gita. Do you know which religious tradition this text comes from? [Guess = Hinduism]

Prompt: No one's quite sure when it was written – maybe 200-500 years before Jesus was alive. [Note: The Bhagavad Gita is a conversation between a prince and his guide, Lord Krishna. The conversation focuses on numerous philosophical and religious issues. In this particular section, Lord Krishna is describing the characteristics of a true Krishna follower. Hinduism is difficult to characterize. One view is that there are three aspects of the Supreme God – Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu. Each of those aspects has avatars/human manifestations. Vishnu had the most avatars. Lord Krishna was one of them.]

Read: Bhagavad Gita 12:13-14

That devotee of Mine who is non-envious possessing benevolence towards all living entities, compassionate with no sense of proprietorship; free from false ego, equal in distress and happiness, forgiving, the always content one perfecting the science of uniting the individual consciousness with the Ultimate Consciousness, self-controlled, with unflinching determination, dedicating mind and spiritual intelligence upon Me is very dear to Me.

Prompt: Clearly, compassion is one of the characteristics of true Lord Krishna follower. What are some of the other characteristics Lord Krishna mentions? [benevolence towards all living beings, no false ego, similar when distressed and when happy, forgiving, etc.]

Prompt: Buddhism also talks about compassion. In fact, many Buddhists consider compassion a very important quality. Do you know/remember what ancient text is most closely associated with Buddhism? [Guess = Tao Te Ching]

Read: Te Ching #32

The whole world says that I am vast, vast and resemble nothing. It is because I resemble nothing that I am able to be vast. If I resembled anything, I would, long before now, have become small.

Now I constantly have three treasures

Which I hold and cherish.

The first is known as compassion,

The second is known as frugality,

The third is known as not daring to take the lead in the empire;

Being compassionate I am able to be courageous;

Being frugal, I am able to be extensive;

Not daring to take the lead in the empire I am able to be lord over the complete vessels.

Now to forsake my compassion for courage, to forsake my frugality for expansion, to give up my position in the rear for the lead, is sure to end in death.

Through compassion, I can triumph in war and be impregnable in defence.

When heaven sets up something, it keeps it, as it were, behind the ramparts of compassion.

Prompt: What do you think of this idea that by being compassionate, you are able to be courageous? Does that make any sense? How can compassion bring courage? Do you agree with that idea? [Share]

Prompt: Do you think that giving up on compassion can lead to death? Can you think of a way in which that might be true? Or is this just a poetic overstatement? [Share – think about whether or not our species or our earth can survive in the absence of compassion.]

Lesson 4: Our Compassion is Divine

Prompt: Let's look at that last line again.

When heaven sets up something, it keeps it...behind the ramparts of compassion.

Prompt: This seems to say that compassion is something that comes from heaven/from the Divine/from God. Do you think that's true? [Share]

Prompt: So now we are getting this idea that God/the Divine is full of compassion. That compassion is bestowed upon us, allowing us to be compassionate toward others. When we are compassionate toward others, we are displaying that part of ourselves that is divine. The first surah of the Qur'an makes a similar point.

Read: Surah 1:1-7 (The Opening)

In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.

Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds;

Most Gracious, Most Merciful.

Master of the Day of Judgment.
You do we worship, and Your aid we seek.
Show us the straight way.
The way of those on whom You have bestowed Your Grace, those whose (portion) is not wrath, and
who do not go astray.

Prompt: This passage is really like a prayer because it asks Allah for help. It asks Allah to “show us the straight way.” What is the straight way? [Share – the way of grace, the way of “not-wrath,” the way of compassion, or their own ideas.]

Prompt: There is actually a goddess of compassion, so to speak, in Buddhism. In Buddhism, divine/enlightened beings are those who have already achieved what normal humans can only hope to achieve. As part of the path to full enlightenment, humans should strive to be completely compassionate. The “enlightenment being” or Buddhist deity associated with compassion is often (but not always) depicted as a female. Her name is Guanyin (kwan-yin), short for Guanshiyin (kwan-shee-yin). She is also known as Avalokitesvara (ah-va-loh-kee-teh-svar-ah). Her name has been translated as “observing the cries of the world,” “perceiving the world’s lamentations,” and “contemplating the world’s sounds.” Here is one image of her.



Guanyin Museum Rietberg RCH 301
Wikimedia Commons: AndreasPraefcke/Gallery 2011f

Prompt: There are many legends surrounding Guanyin. For example, some say that Guanyin vowed that, if she ever became disheartened at the woes of the world, her body would shatter into a thousand pieces. Sure enough, in a moment of frustration over the numerous beings who needed help, Guanyin’s body broke apart. Luckily, the Amitabha Buddha saved Guanyin and blessed her with thousands of hands for helping people. Because of that legend, Guanyin is often shown with hundreds of arms to help everyone in need.



Kek Lok See Penang Avalokitesvara
Wikimedia Commons: Anandajoti

Prompt: Other legends talk about Guanyin being granted many heads to hear the cries of all the people in need. Sometimes, there are also eyes on the palms of all her hands (to perceive the world's suffering). Here are a couple of images to represent those characteristics.

Creative Response: Compassion Quilt

Prompt: We've talked about a lot of passage and images of compassion. Today, we'll make a compassion quilt for our classroom.

Give each person a few paper squares. Have them write/draw something that represents "compassion" for them. They can draw an image, symbol, or scene, or they can write words.

As they are completed, glue them onto the chosen background to create the quilt.

Sources:

- 1) *Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2007. Print.
- 2) Ali, Abdullah Yusuf. *The Qur'an*. Trans. Istanbul, Turkey: ASIR MEDIA, 2002. Print.
- 3) Sells, Michael. *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*. Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999. Print.
- 4) *Baghavad Gita*. Bhagavad Gita Trust, 1998. Web. 24 Sept. 2013. <<http://www.bhagavad-gita.org/>>.
- 5) *Lao-Tzu: Tao Te Ching*. Translation by D.C. Lau. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1994. Print.