

More than Words

10 Values for the Modern Family

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Compassion: Love in Action

It's 8 a.m. Prime time in the elementary school drop-off line. In other words: the first moment of my day to truly test the limits of my love for humankind.

I can wake up feeling refreshed and well rested. I can start my day with a peaceful moment of prayer on the back deck, coffee in hand and the whole day shimmering lovely ahead of me. I can laugh through breakfast with my children, kiss my spouse good-bye, and head out the door in comfortable shoes with a fully charged phone. I am like Snow White, complete with birds singing around my head. All is right with the world.

But then, there's the car line. There's a person in a giant SUV making an *illegal left turn* into the school to cut in line—because clearly rules don't apply to them and they are in a hurry and they are *important*—and I am suddenly filled with rage. All that deep yoga breathing and morning prayer goes out the window, and I become the worst caricature of suburban life. “*They only send home a weekly paper note and a daily email, reminding you to go to the back of the line!*” I shout to no one. “*It's completely understandable that you don't know any better!*”

At least my windows are tinted. So I've got that going for me.

Love is the first family value. Most people, from any background or faith framework, would claim it as a critical core of belief, whether that means love of family, love for community and neighbor, or love for creation. The trouble is . . . love can become a cultural abstraction, impossibly vague and intangible. Love can be easily reduced to a word on a page or a greeting card sentiment, hijacked by the entertainment industry for the purposes of another formulaic rom-com, or applied haphazardly to the most surface-level things in our lives. I love coffee. And wine. And *Harry Potter*. And vacation. I *really* love vacation. And also wine. Especially after a week of navigating the drop-off line. Mercy.

We “love” lots of things that we can name, touch, taste, and see. And yet, the same expression of “love” gets applied, uniformly, to our most meaningful connections. Clearly, my love for, say, the perfect BLT is not the same as my love for my children. Or the love that a church family expresses in caring community.

How can we root a values system in love when the means of expression are so nebulous? The pitfalls of this “loving” ambiguity are not just related to language. The greater concern is that within the language of love there are any number of ways to enact hate, judgment, fear, and scarcity on the people around us, while still calling it a loving value. Telling Jewish people they are going to hell, for instance: but hey, it’s just “speaking the truth in love.” Or kicking a gay child out of the church or family while claiming to “love the sinner, but hate the sin.”

That kind of love doesn’t feel very loving. And yet, the word is the same.

It is one thing to verbally claim love as the root of a values system. It’s another thing entirely to let compassion do the driving in everything, from our casual interactions to our most important relationships. But if we could learn to do just that, it would be a game changer—not just for our lives and families, but also for the world around us.

There’s a word for love with skin on it: *compassion*.

Many communal values systems operate from that “love the sinner, hate the sin” perspective. Nuance that phrase any number of ways, but hate cannot abide that closely to love without fundamentally tarnishing love’s good intentions. That is love that lives on the surface, but lacks arms and legs; love that is well-meaning, but still lets judgment do most of the talking.

On the surface, “family values” culture may look like warm, fuzzy stuff: Love, loyalty, and strong relationships. Start pulling on some of those threads, though, and we uncover the many ways in which love is limited, and relationships are rigidly defined—even confining. In any number of ways, love—in its vague abstractions—leaves a lot of room for hate to creep in around the edges. And not just hate—fear, rage, passive aggression, and any number of social ills that come from well-meaning sentimentality but ultimately become destructive forces in our lives and families.

Compassion, on the other hand, doesn’t leave room for judgment or fear, or exclusion, or rigid parameters of belonging. Why? Because compassion is *work*. And those who are busy, every day, enacting compassion on the world have neither the time nor the brain space available for deciding who’s in and who’s out, for flinching at any sign of “otherness,” or for the general shenanigans of moral posturing.

And this is where values have the power to reshape us and our world. When we can truly identify what our core values are—beyond abstraction, sound bites, and bumper stickers—they move to the center of our lives. When we nurture those values, they expand, leaving no space for that which tears down others, wastes our time, and distracts us from the holiness inherent in all things.

Our values system is naturally rooted in that which we love. Love is our primary human compass. But let love just sit there—a thing we feel, or a word we say—and so many other things can work their way into our lives and hearts. Compassion is the exercise by which that love takes on flesh in our own faith, our family, and the world.

My early morning rant in the car line might not be hurting anyone. It is not overtly hateful or harmful. But what I've come to realize—as I explore my values and the ways in which they can direct my life, home, and faith practice—is that the “harmless” anxiety and rage that crop up in these everyday moments are not entirely harmless after all.

For instance: I catch myself wanting to roll down the window and shout at one dad in a giant pickup truck, “You can't do that! You have to go to the back of the line like everyone else!” I want to lay on the horn (OK, sometimes I have laid on the horn) and wildly gesture that there is a *line* here, and you are straight-up breaking the first and primary rule of kindergarten: wait your eff'n turn, bro.

But, let's say that I allow myself to indulge that compulsion. I yell, I honk, I act like a deranged caricature of suburbia, but then, say, two weeks later, I realize that guy's kid is in my kid's class, and we are on the Halloween party planning committee together. Suddenly, I find that I don't want to be so involved in my kid's class this year after all. My momentary anger has damaged a longer term relationship—not just with this one family but with an entire network of families who will be in my kid's life this year.

What if this guy turns out to be my neighbor as well? Do I avoid his wife at the mailbox? Do I duck and not say hello at the grocery store? My entire communal environment has been disrupted by one unloving moment.

This is undesirable outcome number one, in a progressive family values system. The narrative that we want to build is not just a rejection of harmful, fundamentalist rhetoric—but a better, more life-giving story for our family and world. That work is primarily rooted in connectivity and the wholeness of humanity. Any fracture in that system, however small, contributes to the greater schisms that harm us all.

Add to that the missed opportunity to model grace and kindness for those little people in the backseat. What does this do to her playground behavior? His ability to play on a team? Their outlook on the world and its people as a whole?

A 10-second outburst can have a ripple effect—and not the good kind—on the way in which we engage the world. We all have these moments, and hopefully we can learn to extend some grace to even our worst selves on those days. But more importantly, we can use those darker moments to recognize that simple acts of compassion can also ripple, in a good way. In the best possible ways.

The truth is, anxiety or rage that crops up in an everyday kind of moment is really rushing in to fill a void. A void that I have enabled through my own lack of intention.

How can I fill that void with life-giving things instead?

What if we started taking the long view, every day? What if we cultivated the all-consuming mindfulness of knowing that each word or interaction affects our overall relationship potential? In a hundred small ways a day, we have the power to be intentional in the ways we engage our family, our neighbor, and the world around us. This is how we build a better narrative that is not just reactionary and prescriptive, but life-giving and transformative. And it starts here.

It starts, like God's mercies, new every morning. It starts with having a moment to breathe before I rush into the day, a moment to ground myself in the abiding love that I know lives within me, and can transform the world if I let it. It starts with being the kind of person each day that I want my kids to see me be. If I want them to know love that is more than words, I have to work on modeling that loving presence to our friends and neighbors. Even when it's not easy or obvious. Even when it may not make for a good bumper sticker.

PRACTICING COMPASSION AT HOME

Perhaps the best way to nurture the value of compassion is to encourage our children in that which they already love.

My daughter has been a vegetarian since she was four years old. The minute she found out where that pork chop came from, she started quietly saying "I don't eat meat" and pushing

it away. We still included small portions on her plate for a while—until she started loudly declaring “*I DON’T EAT ANIMALS!*” in restaurants.

This is a child who once obsessed for days about a lost cat poster she saw at the park. “Where will it sleep? How did it get lost? What if they don’t find it? Can we please go look some more and take that cat home to its family?” This is the child who cried for hours when she saw a dog chained up in a yard, worried that it might be left outside overnight and get cold. This is the kid who is always first to run and take the leftover communion bread out to feed the birds.

She didn’t get it from her parents. I mean, we like animals. Animals are great. We love our family dog, we want SeaWorld to be more humane, and we carefully read the animal-safety instructions at every national park we visit. But we love bacon. And cheeseburgers. There was nothing intentional on our part that would have caused our toddler to develop the heart of Saint Francis. But it is the heart she has, and so we do our best to care for it.

When we encourage her in that which she already loves, it becomes a compassionate way of life that will shape how she interacts with the world. I try to involve her in SAGE, our church’s environmental ministry. I introduce her to people who are connected with animal advocacy and preservation efforts. They send her reading material about a wolf rescue place in New Mexico. We go to the library for animal books. And yes, we let her be a vegetarian. Even at age four, five, now eight and someday eighteen. Even if it means making something extra for dinner so she has enough protein; even if it means the rest of us make an effort to eat less meat.

In this way, she is beginning to shape the world around her—even within her own household, where we now try to eat meat only twice a week. In addition to just supporting her, there are also significant environmental and economic reasons to eat less meat. And a child shall lead them.

Speaking of food—my boy child loves food. *Loves* it. Ever since he was a baby. In fact, from the time he could eat solid

food until the time he could effectively feed himself, we could not eat in a restaurant because he would sit in his high chair and scream bloody murder in between bites. We literally could not shovel it in fast enough for him, and if somebody else was chewing and there was not food in, or on the way to, his mouth, there was hell to pay. So for nearly a year, there was only home cooking on the menu.

Once he got to be about 18 months old and he could feed himself a slice of pizza (or rather, a whole pizza), then all was right in the world. He is the most well-behaved kid in the restaurant now, because if there's food, he is happy.

He doesn't just love to eat. He loves to go grocery shopping. He loves to look at recipes on the computer with me, and he loves to cook. When he was about 3, I realized that he could put all the groceries away *by himself*, and he loved to do it. He was so happy going through the bags to see what I got. "Cinnamon rolls!" he would call to his sister. "Mommy got cinnamon rolls! And apples! And yogurt!" The kid loves food (and speaking in exclamation marks).

Perhaps he did come by this foodie spirit by way of his parents. In any case, it is an easy love to nurture, in many ways. Yes, he helps with the groceries and he will hopefully be cooking us dinner in the foreseeable future. But we try to harness his love of food in ways that can be turned outward as well.

Our neighborhood food bank is one of the few places in our area that allows young children to volunteer. So on many a Friday morning we spend a couple hours sorting and packaging food for other people at "the food helping place." He may or may not understand the premise—that some people don't have enough to eat, and we want to help them—but he definitely understands food. Sorting frozen french fries into plastic baggies, tossing the broken eggs and salvaging the keepers, organizing boxes of cereal and pasta—this kid is in his element.

Meanwhile, my husband is teaching him the joys of gardening—a new endeavor at our house. As they both learn the art of bringing edibles up from the ground, my son is

connecting two of his great loves—food and Dad—with ways of caring for the earth. He is also getting to do fun things like composting. We call him the sheriff, because he does not mess around. “Don’t throw that away!” he shouts, as he polices the trash bins.

Whether or not he understands the significance of what he is doing at this young age, he is learning compassionate ways of living, as it applies to his favorite thing in life: food. Just as my daughter is learning that her love for animals can have outward, global expressions. I trust that encouraging them in what already sits close to their hearts will ultimately shape their character, their connective abilities, and the hopeful ways in which they approach the world.

Maybe someday, I will find that I’m the mother of an environmentalist and a humanitarian aid worker. Maybe between the two of them they will save the planet and end world hunger.

Or maybe they will be a vet and a chef who are kind to their neighbors. I’ll call it a win, either way.

We may not always know how to “teach” compassion to a child. But we do know how to stoke the fires of what they already love. We know how to model compassion in ordinary, everyday ways. And every now and then, we catch a glimpse of what it looks like when that value has effectively taken root in a child’s being.

Teaching compassion is not a list of behaviors. It is a way of moving through the world. And moving through the world as compassionate people is not just the work of raising children. It is the work of our faith. It is the work that transforms, and puts flesh on the gospel.

My friend Annie writes beautifully about life with her son Collin. Collin has a genetic disease, one that is rare and mostly a mystery. She recently shared this story, about an ordinary day:

I have to admit, when the older lady signaled that she wanted to ask me a question, I sighed inside. It felt like we had been riding a wave of Collin interactions ranging

from uncomfortable to hurtful. Lots of “What’s wrong with him?” and “Please list everything he will and won’t be able to do for the rest of his life.”

But when I kneeled down so I could hear her over the splashing and yelling, she said, “Can I ask you: how would you prefer me to talk to my grandkids about your son?”

I looked over at Collin. His hair stood up in a dripping fin and his face shone with the joy of being weightless in the water. The woman’s red-haired grandchildren crowded close around him and the aquatherapist, glued to his every move as they tried to figure out what exactly they were seeing.

“Would you use the word ‘special’?” she went on. “Would you say he has special needs? Is that a term you’re comfortable with?”

I may have visibly expanded with gratitude. This woman knew that words were important. She could have said anything she wanted without me ever knowing, but she knew it mattered how she talked about Collin. It mattered for her grandkids, for Collin, and for me.

I told her to tell them that his name is Collin. That he has disabilities which, for him, means that a lot of the things other kids his age can easily do, he can’t do yet.

Her grandson had sidled up quietly. “Like swimming?” he asked.

I smiled. “No, actually he’s really good at swimming. It’s other things like talking and walking he has trouble with.”

He nodded and returned to Collin. I introduced them. They were both six years old. And, like some kind of soaking wet miracle, the little boy reached out and they shook hands.¹

We may not be able to put an easy list of bullet points around the work of compassion, but we know the fruits of that labor when we see it. In this story, we see what it looks like when children have taken note of the daily practice of active compassion, and mirror that behavior back to us. That’s how the values we model at home in small, daily ways take shape in the world around us.

PRACTICING COMPASSION IN COMMUNITY

My neighbors, Courtney and Stephanie, wanted to find intentional ways for their families to serve the community. The challenge is that most nonprofits don't allow volunteers under a certain age. Feeling strongly that the roots of compassion need to be planted in early childhood, these two moms took another approach. They started planning age-appropriate ways for young school age children to help others, and to learn more about the needs present in their community.

For their first few activities—like making blankets for patients at a children's hospital—they involved a few other families. But they realized that many other families shared their desire to do something active, but didn't always know where to start. So they planned a toiletry drive for a local mission, and invited all the families in our school to participate. In order to create a more hands-on experience, they planned an evening gathering for the kids to organize the donations and assemble toiletry kits.

The response was overwhelming. Over 200 people showed up for that first event. Before all was said and done, it was not just a neighborhood thing. Thanks to the wonders of social media, friends—and friends of friends—got involved.

In just a few months, that first big event evolved into a nonprofit, aptly named KindCraft² (think “Minecraft,” with a clever pixilated logo). The name, like the group itself, evolved out of a desire to build a compassionate lifestyle in families and in neighborhood communities. This movement grew quickly from two families to many, drawing in people from different churches, neighborhoods, and scout troops.

The rapid growth of this new organization shows a real hunger present in most of our communities. People genuinely want to serve, to model compassionate living for their children, and to give life to their corner of the world. People also want to know their neighbors better, even if much of our culture speaks to growing isolation and the worship of autonomy.

When we answer the desire to serve others and the need to feel rooted in our place, then we are acknowledging an important truth of human experience, and a central philosophy of progressive values—*it's not just about us*. We are only as strong as the community in which we live, and we, ourselves, are strengthened in community.

This is where vital communities of faith, and even neighborhood groups can truly find their power and relevance in our current context. When we can connect (1) the fundamental need for community and (2) the deep desire for meaning and purpose, we have unlocked the heart of the gospel. Individuals grow in faith, families are strengthened, and the local community becomes an extension of that compassionate spirit.

As in other forms of learning, tactile, hands-on experience is the best teacher. We want people of all ages in our families and churches to grow in a spirit of love, service, and outward thinking; and that spirit is most firmly rooted in practice.

Even in the car line.

COMPASSION IN SCRIPTURE

Surprisingly, the word “compassion” doesn’t appear much in English translations of Scripture. One of the few places it does occur is in the story of the Prodigal Son.

In Luke 15:11–32, a son has abandoned his family’s values and cashed in his inheritance early in order to go on a journey of what can only be called youthful hedonism. Predictably, he blows it all in Vegas (or the biblical equivalent thereof): wine, women, gambling, fast cars, the works. Finding himself cold, hungry, and sleeping among the pigs, he does what errant kids have done since the beginning of time: he wonders if he can go home again. Will he be accepted in this shameful state? Or has too much been lost? Perhaps they will just send him off to sleep in his filth. It’s what he would deserve, after all.

The good news—for him, and for wandering youth everywhere—is that real love is not about deserving. As he winds his way up that driveway, head hung in shame and stomach aching with hunger, his father greets him “with compassion,” the Scripture tells us; with joyful abandon.

This is not just passive acceptance: *Okay, I guess you can sleep in the barn and earn your keep.* This is not a passive-aggressive exercise in “Loving the sinner, hating the sin,” by which the father takes the son back but constantly reminds him of his wrongdoing. This father pursues active compassion. This is love, embodied and mobile.

How can this father be so “filled with compassion” when, clearly, what that boy needs is a good head-thumping? Or at the very least, to have his iPhone taken away for eternity. That’s certainly what his brother would like to see happen. (Then again, how many of us would even be here right now, if our siblings had been allowed to decide our fate in matters of justice and discipline?)

But the satisfying, well-deserved ass-kicking is not what we witness. Instead, we hear a story of transformative love. Mercy, forgiveness, and radical acceptance change the boy’s life direction more than any act of discipline ever could. The boy who broke his heart; the boy who took what he wanted and left, thinking of none but himself; and yet, here we witness the pure joy of a parent whose child has come home.

The father and the brother in this story represent two different ways of being family. There is the brother’s way—the way of responding to baser impulses and holding onto grudges; the way of indignant outrage and “it’s my turn,” and “that’s not fair.” It is, ultimately, the way of dwelling in what’s been lost.

Or, there is the father’s way: the way of loving with abandon, extending undeserved mercy; it is the way of running down the driveway, the way of “bring up the fatted calf” and “put the best sheets on his old bed” and “wherever you’ve been, whatever you’ve done, we only care that you are here now.”

That is the way of compassion. And it is a core value of the faith that we share, and the strong, loving families that we hope to raise.

Scripture is full of dysfunctional families—abuse and rejection, lies and betrayal, neglect and violence and retribution—but we also find instances of love embodied; the radical roots of belonging that overcome any wrongdoing or wayward wandering.

Our call is to model this *radical rooting* in our families and faith communities. Exhibiting compassion, not just in an everyday kind of way, but at the moment when it feels the most counterintuitive. Of course, there are moments for discipline, and there are times when natural consequences can be the greatest teacher. But there are also days—most of the days, when we think about it—when the work of compassion holds the greater powers of transformation.

Perhaps the best, most important ministry we can do—as parents, and as the Church—is to raise compassionate children. In daily, intentional ways, we impart this value to the kids in our circles: not just as a spark of verbal wisdom, but as a truth that they know in the core of their being. Rooted in radical, embodied love, they will know beyond doubt that they can always come home, and will always be loved and accepted. If we watch closely, we'll see that they approach their world in this same compassionate way.

AROUND THE TABLE: QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What passion does your child possess that could be nurtured into an active compassion? What passions of your own could be focused outward?
2. When have you heard “love” expressed in a way that might not be very loving in spirit? How might you reframe that perspective and shape it into something more life-giving?

3. Where do you meet your greatest challenge to compassionate living?
4. How does your church, family, or local community engage in acts of compassion? Do you see evidence of this practice or activity in the world around you?