



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Icons of Compassion: Mother Mary and Kuan Yin”

© by Aleta Turner, Lay Minister

A sermon delivered on July 12, 2015

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*Mary, Mother of Jesus, please be a mother to me now.* Prayer of Mother Teresa

*With love, let a new breeze blow through your house—*

*The Way is cleared by Te, Virtue, as it always was . . .*

*So clear your path of the harsh growths that separate you,*

*When all Three can be in harmony, you'll know what's to come.* Kuan Yin poem #35

*For me, I am driven by two main philosophies: know more today about the world than I knew yesterday and lessen the suffering of others. You'd be surprised how far that gets you.*

Neil deGrasse Tyson

### Sermon

Helen Keller told us, “Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.” Suffering is part of the human condition, but so are love and compassion. The moment of a birth is marked by the baby’s screaming at the shocking change in its environs. Soon though, the baby is soothed by being cradled in Mother’s arms and with the sound her cooing a lullaby.

We may grow too large for our mothers to rock us, but we never grow out of a need for compassion. Because another attribute of humans is that we find or create images of what we need, we have the stories of Kuan Yin and Mother Mary. Mary’s iconography was influenced by earlier depictions of Isis with her baby Horus, and images of Mary are in turn thought to have influenced depictions of Kuan Yin.

Kuan Yin has her origins as the male bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. A bodhisattva, in case you are unfamiliar with the term, is in Buddhism a person who has attained Enlightenment, but stays on earth to help others also attain it. The Mahayana tradition of Buddhism has a text called the Lotus Sutra which tells of Avalokitesvara. In Sanskrit this means “The Lord Who Regards the Cries of the World”. In Chinese, this became Kuan Shi Yin, or “The One Who Hears the Cries of the World”, and the bodhisattva somehow transformed into a female, although the details of how this

occurred have been lost. The “Shi” portion of the name was essentially lost when a particular emperor banned any mention of his previous name, leaving us with the form Kuan Yin and many variants thereon, such as Guanyin and Kannon in Japan. She is often depicted in a white robe for purity. Some versions give her 1000 eyes to see those suffering, and 1000 hands so that she can reach out to give aid to many at once.

Mary is of course known to us as the mother of Jesus. While in some branches of Christianity, she has a relatively minor side role, in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, she is greatly venerated. Wikipedia tells us that “[t]he earliest known prayer to Mary” begins, “Beneath your compassion, we take refuge.” She is called the Mother of Sorrows for the great loss she bore and is called upon to relieve the suffering of others. The visits of pilgrims to sites of Marian apparitions all over the world – and as close to home as Conyers, Georgia – are testament to the connection people long for with a compassionate being.

Portuguese navigators prayed to Mary as a protectress from storms and other hazards of the sea. Kuan Yin is similarly looked upon to protect people from the dangers of the sea and to make their lives easier. Both are said to heal the sick, to make fertile women wanting children, and to calm fears.

Answering suffering with compassion can also require that we face fears, that we become angry, and that we risk taking on suffering ourselves to help. Francisco X. Alarcón wrote his poem, “Tlazolteotl” – which you heard this morning, to a Mary with aspects also of an Aztec goddess – in response to the deaths of many friends from AIDS. Mother Teresa worked among the poorest of the poor because of her compassion – she must have had faith in doing good, despite her doubts in God. One of Kuan Yin’s guises has her riding a white lion whose roar is truth. In this version, she has four hands: holding a lotus of truth, a phoenix with three heads – for the fire of the South, a white bird to chase away darkness, and a fish whose always open eyes represent compassion. This Kuan Yin, who went to hell to free all people until she was forced to leave, teaches courage in the face of danger.

In the tales of Mary and Kuan Yin, both women listen to the cries of hurting people and then try to help. We need to listen. The recent shooting in Charleston and subsequent church burnings, at least some of which are known to be arson, are the boiling over of a hatred that has continued to fester in this country. Those of us who are white – even the vast majority, I think, who are horrified by such events – are being told, if we will hear it, about how we continue to benefit from institutionalized forms of racism to the detriment of others. There is so much defensiveness: “I won’t feel guilty for something I didn’t do,” is a cry I keep hearing. No, we didn’t put these systems in place. However, we must listen to the evidence of how the systems are perpetuated and how they continue to hurt people today; we must try to understand and stop systems that pay black people less for the same education and experience as a white person, just as we continue to fight for gender equity in pay. We must not only say all lives matter; we have to fight against ways of thought and behavior that deny that black lives matter. No mother should have to cry because her child was killed -period – whether for holding a toy in Walmart, or any other reason. We have to

end the burning of black churches. I know that I need to a better job Standing on the Side of Love, not just sitting by while others do the work. I'm not really sure how to do that, but I am trying to listen to and stand in solidarity with people who do have ideas.

I do not have 1000 hands to reach fearlessly. I only have these two. If we each try to be mothers to the children of the world, if we each reach out in loving kindness to our neighbors, if we each extend our hands, our many times 1000 hands have to make a difference.

Bree Newsome used her two hands to pull down the Confederate Battle flag in South Carolina. It was the collective work of many hands and voices united that brought it down permanently, and thousands over time have worked, and continue to work, so that the flag of LGBTQ equality can be flown without fear. Let us extend our 1000 hands even further.

May it be so.

**Talk Back** – How can we respond most compassionately to events in our world?

### **Questions for Reflection & Discussion**

1. How did someone's great compassion affect you? Whose examples do you try to emulate?
2. Are you able to be compassionate for those you don't understand or with whom you disagree?  
What would enable you to have greater compassion for them?
3. Are you as compassionate with yourself as you are others? How can you be more loving to yourself?