



Self-Compassion (Compassion Lesson 3)

This lesson helps youth to compassionately tend to their racialized parts.

Duration: 60 minutes

ENHANCER OF JOY

Compassion

DURATION

60 minutes

LESSON DEVELOPED BY

Seth Schoen and Christopher Carter

GOAL

Compassionately loving ourselves - even the parts we don't like - because God loves us.

TIPS TO PREPARE

Thorough reading of introduction to curriculum.

MATERIALS CHECKLIST

- Copy of handout for each participant
 - Pens/Pencils
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SETTING THE ATMOSPHERE

Chairs can be set up in either a half circle facing the facilitator or in a full circle where the facilitator is among those in the circle.

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

Genesis 1:26-27, 31

Then God said, "Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth." God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them...God saw everything he had made: it was supremely good.

1st John 3:1a

See what kind of love the Father has given to us in that we should be called God's children, and that is what we are!

Purpose

The goal of this session is to help the participants compassionately tend to one of their racialized parts and to see themselves as a child of God.

Objectives

Youth will understand that race is one part of their identity that is complex in today's society, and yet loved in the eyes of God.

Further Study

Frank Rogers, *Practicing Compassion*

Introduction for Leaders

These sessions are an abbreviated and age appropriate version of the Embodied Racial Awareness program designed by Drs. Seth Schoen and Christopher Carter. The goal of these sessions is to create a space for young people to explore their racial identities and celebrate their embodiment as bearers of the *imago Dei* and children of God. In this way, the goals of these sessions are to address emotional and structural difficulties that young people face when they are trying to make sense of what it means to be racialized. Given that we understand joy to be *an affective affirmation of the concrete reality of ourselves and others as beloved with regard to the wholeness of our identities.*^[1] It is imperative that the church become a place where our racial differences are seen as diverse and complimentary parts of the body of Christ. To be sure, the history of racism, segregation, and nationalism within American Christianity has inhibited our ability to accomplish this goal. And yet we have faith that all things are possible through Christ our Lord. We have seen glimpses of interracial beloved communities within American Christianity, perhaps most notably in the Church of All Peoples in San Francisco founded by Christian theologian and contemplative Howard Thurman. Following Thurman's lead and using our own work in race and contemplative theory, this curriculum is designed to help groups develop an embodied understanding of our racial identities in order to inform and strengthen our ability to fashion together a beloved community.

Cultivating joy around issues of race and racism involves compassionately understanding ourselves and others as racialized people. As a way to introduce the sessions we believe it would be helpful for youth leaders to develop a working knowledge of the theories that help us understand ourselves as racialized and compassionate human beings; essential aspects of living into the *imago Dei*. As such, the remainder of the introduction elaborates on the components of critical race and racial formation theories and the Compassion Practice most relevant to the curriculum and demonstrate the practical importance of these theories through the lived experience of two adolescents. Our goal is to provide you with a taste of the theories we use and demonstrate their explanatory and transformative potential in real world settings. In this way, you will be able to understand how they would work in your own ministry setting.

Racial formation (i.e. seeing the reality of race)

The theory of racial formation is a theoretical framework that provides an illuminating view of the sociohistorical process of racial identity, both structurally and personally.^[2] Structurally, racial formation provides a way to begin thinking about how the broader patterning of race (i.e. racialized social structures) shapes the institutions, communities, and social worlds in which we live and act. Personally, racial formation offers insight into how we manifest these larger racialized social structures in our everyday lives, and within our bodies. Racial formation is defined as “the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed.”^[3] Racial formation involves the core processes of *racialization*, and *racial projects*. *Racialization* is “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group.”^[4] The core of the racialization process involves imparting social and symbolic meaning to perceived physical differences. These physical differences are then understood as the manifestations of more profound differences within racially identified persons.^[5] There is an irreducible visual dimension to racialization. Stereotypes such as African Americans are more athletic than whites, or that Asians are good at science and math are examples of racialization. Every aspect of our social and physical world is subject to the process of racialization. The fact that we can interpret racial meanings is evidence of a preexisting racialized social structure. We understand the stereotypes above, for example, precisely because we exist within a racialized social structure.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theorists seek to understand how race and racism function in order to “uncover the ongoing dynamics of racialized power, and its embeddedness in practices and values which seemingly do not have racial manifestations.”^[6] There are four key concepts of critical race theory (CRT) that are important for the curriculum: race as a social fact, racism is normal, intersectionality, and centering the stories of people of color. To be sure, these four claims are extremely strong. An honest assessment of American Christianity and its history of **theologically** justifying events all Christians should believe were immoral and inconsistent with the Gospel of Christ (e.g. coloniality, indigenous genocide, slavery, to name but a few) reveal a racist history that we must confront if we desire to heal a fractured Church.

Race is a social fact

CRT scholars view race as a social fact. Once race acquired the level of social meaning and influence to define groups of people “race [became] a real category of group association and identity.”^[7] Like gender and class, race is a classification system and is now a permanent part of our social world. It is part of the way meaning is made in the world, and an element of social structure rather than an irregularity within it.

Discourses that deny racial consciousness and focus on being post-racial, such as colorblind views of race, legitimate current practices of racial subordination, and white supremacy. Importantly, these practices are largely invisible to most whites. One major concern with colorblind theories of race is their conception of race as a problem.^[8] This problematic conception arises from conflating race with racism. Obviously, racism is a major problem, but we cannot end it by unthinking or ignoring race. This is akin to treating pancreatic cancer by ignoring the pancreas. We cannot step outside of race and racism because our society and identities are constituted by them. A more effective starting point is to recognize that even with the uncertainties and contradictions, race plays a fundamental role in structuring and representing the social world.^[9] Therefore, race is a social fact of life.

Racism is normal

Racial meaning making is not inherently racist. It becomes racist, however, in the context of a racially stratified society, such as the United States, that limits the life chances of those on the bottom of the racial hierarchy. In this racial hierarchy the status differences of groups of people occur along racial lines and material, psychological, social, physiological, and economic opportunities are unevenly distributed according to one's racialization within the system. In this context, acts of racism, such as those committed in Ferguson, Baltimore, Charlottesville or anywhere in the United States should be understood as a normal outcome of the racialized social structure in which we live, rather than the result of an individual with an idiosyncratic, pathological view of race. It is crucial to point out that viewing racist phenomena as "normal" in no way speaks to the justness of those phenomena. The "normalcy" of racist phenomena does not make them just. "The strategy becomes unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations."^[10] *The question becomes not what is wrong with those racists out there, but what is wrong with us?* What systemic, structural problem do these acts of racism point to that needs tending? How do I contribute to that problem, and how does it manifest within me? How might I practice becoming compassionately anti-racist?

Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality is central to CRT and intimately involves issues of identity, categorizing, and othering. We all have complex identities that intersect in a myriad of ways and the nexus of two or more of our identities and their associated power dynamics are the focus of intersectionality. Kimberle Williams Crenshaw developed this concept reflecting on her identity as a woman and African American. From her own lived experience, and the insights of others who share this identity, Crenshaw has shed light on deep-seated and problematic assumptions of feminist and antiracist practices:

Women of color are marginalized within both feminist and antiracist discourses because of their intersectional identity as women *and* of color...Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. Thus,

when the practices expound identity as “woman” or “person of color” as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling.^[11]

Consequently, women of color cannot feel at home in either setting. Crenshaw offers the concept of intersectionality to emphasize the importance of accounting for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed.^[12]

Stephanie Wildman brings an intersectional approach to her critique of privilege and power systems. She explains that “privilege can intersect with subordination or other systems of privilege as well...there is no purely privileged or unprivileged persons.”^[13] Her critique is particularly useful for unmasking privilege and how it intersects with forms of identity. In particular, Wildman points out that *privilege is not perceived as something bestowed on us, rather it is experienced as the way things are and the way things are supposed to be*. This makes privilege invisible to its holder and difficult to notice. For whites who cannot see their white privilege, this allows them to unwittingly perpetuate and reinforce racist social structures. In this sense all whites are racist because we benefit from systemic white privilege.^[14]

Narrative and Centering People of Color’s Experiences

Narrative and centering the experiences of people of color are core recurring themes throughout CRT literature. This emphasis on experience as an epistemological source is crucial. “The imagination of the academic philosopher cannot recreate the experience of life on the bottom. We must look to grassroots philosophers...who are uniquely able to relate theory to the concrete experience of oppression.”^[15] Storytelling contextualizes racism and experientially names its effects. Through the stories of people of color these theories are revealed not as abstract explanations of the world “out there” but explanations of the way our everyday lives are shaped by race and racism. “When notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, are examined not from an abstract position but from the position of groups who have suffered through history, moral relativism recedes, and identifiable normative priorities emerge.”^[16]

A unique contribution of the embodied racial awareness curriculum is that while the stories of people of color are centered, the stories of those from the dominant culture are seen as critical too. The foundation for practicing anti-racism involves learning to see race in the world around us and how it operates within us. As such, it is crucial for whites to be able to develop an embodied understanding of their own racialization. This is an important practice we must engage as part of cultivating joy in racialized contexts.

To authentically be one in Christ and enhance joy, youth groups must be places where our racialized experiences can be held with compassion, where we can find strength and support to explore our racial identities and experience healing around the trauma caused by the fact

of racism in our country and in our Churches. The reality of race unearthed by these theories does not stop at the church door. Our racial identities and the racialized social structures in which we exist are ever present. In this way youth groups can be sites for resistance to and liberation from the sin of racism. In this unique Christian context, empowering adolescents with a liberatory racial project of joy involves cultivating the radical compassion of Jesus. For Christians, Jesus is the key to sustaining an anti-racist way of life.

Practicing Christ-like Compassion

Our capacity for joy is inhibited by emotions that become activated around race, reactions you likely experienced while reading the preceding section. We are all familiar with these emotions; a desire to lash out in anger at a racist comment, a dull feeling in the pit of our stomach when the topic of race is broached, fear that we might be labeled racist or confirm a stereotype, anxiety during an interracial encounter, or helplessness and numbing when facing the sheer magnitude of racism in America. These familiar emotions often stop us in our tracks. We feel as if they are hurdles preventing us from connecting with others or doing the ‘real’ work of anti-racism. However, there is a profound but obscured secret in these emotions. Strange as it may seem *these emotions are trying to help us and guide us to a flourishing life.*

What most of us lack are the skills for understanding how our emotional reactions around race are trying to guide us. The radical compassion of Jesus offers those skills. Understanding the yearning at the core of these internal movements (feelings, emotions, reactivities, sensations, impulses, etc.) is actually the key to sustaining deep, meaningful, and transformative engagement with issues race and racism. Our strong reactions and emotions are guides for what is most important to us. It is our habitual responses to them that prevents us from understanding and harnessing their wisdom.

Cultivating compassion hones the capacities necessary for understanding how our emotions are trying to help us and enables deep relational connection with ourselves and others. It empowers us to see the world unfiltered by our own desires and agendas and to radically humanize how we view and engage people. With this empowered compassion we can then chart a course of action that is grounded in the authenticity and needs of everyone involved. Cultivating compassion involves four basic steps:

1. Catch your breath (Get grounded)
2. Take your PULSE (Cultivate compassion for yourself)
3. Take the other’s PULSE (Cultivate compassion for another)
4. Decide what to do (Discern compassionate action)^[17]

Catching your breath is crucial for engaging our inner worlds, difficult conversations, and other triggering activities. When we are feeling triggered or reactive it is important to find some space emotionally and/or physically for our reactivities to settle. Space between the

emotion we feel and our reaction to that emotion is crucial. What if the white student at Yale had paused to ground herself before calling the police on another black student who fell asleep while studying for finals?^[18]

The time we need to ground ourselves and find this space may be a quick momentary breath, or it may require years before we feel grounded enough to engage the situation more clearly.^[19] Either way, the foundation for 'Taking Your Pulse' requires the clarity and stability that come through continually soaking in the Presence of Compassion."^[20] Once we have caught our breath and feel grounded we can move deeper into the practice and begin taking our PULSE. Throughout this process we can return to grounding ourselves in compassion whenever we feel the space between our emotions and reactions growing smaller.

Taking our PULSE involves six essential components. Every experience of compassion however large or small involves the following six dimensions. These six dimensions, therefore, provide our definition of compassion:^[21]

P - Paying attention (Contemplative awareness). Perceiving another's experience with a nonjudgmental, nonreactive clarity.

U - Understanding empathically (Empathic care). Being moved by the sometimes hidden suffering within that person.

L - Loving with connection (All-accepting presence). Being filled with and extending an all-embracing care.

S - Sensing the sacredness (Spiritual expansiveness). Recognizing and savoring the cosmic expanse of compassion that holds and heals all wounds.

E - Embodying new life (Desire for flourishing). Yearning for the restorative flourishing to be birthed within another.

ACT - Then from the PULSE of this compassionate connection, we respond with tangible acts of healing, kindness, and care.

Paying attention; Usually, our awareness of others and how we relate to them is filtered through our own feelings, needs, wants, and desires. We see them through the lens of our own agenda. We usually do not see others on their own terms. In this movement of the practice our intention is to pay attention to the experience of another person or an interior movement within us without filtering it through the reactive lens of our own agenda. Through maintaining this kind of open awareness toward ourselves and others we become grounded in the "Self-presence that is genuinely open to the movement and curious about why this movement is within us at all."^[22]

Understanding empathically involves feeling ‘got.’ It is a visceral feeling of being understood at our core. In its simplest form compassion involves being moved by the suffering or joy of another’s experience. When this happens a compassionate person allows another’s pain or joy to reverberate within his or her deepest core such that he or she is moved to pathos before the other’s suffering or stirred to delight before the other’s flourishing. A compassionate person understands, in his or her depths, the wounds, heartaches, and longings at the core of another person’s behavior and experience.^[23]

Loving with connection involves an all accepting presence. At the heart of compassion is a non-judgmental, all embracing, loving quality. Loving with connection involves experiential awareness of this quality, and there is no easy way to conceptually explain it. Frank Rogers uses the metaphor of a mother cradling her child to illustrate the intimacy of this connection.^[24] For example, Rogers imagines loving with connection as “well[ing] up with a connective care that extends toward others like the soothing wash of the sunlight’s warmth.”^[25] We experience it in our own lives during the moments when we feel held, loved, safe, and cared for. It is the moments when we feel worthy of love simply because we exist. Theologically loving with connection is the gift of grace given by God. We are worthy of God’s love simply because we exist. Held in this loving connection we sense the sacredness within ourselves and others.

Sensing the Sacredness is, perhaps, a unique contribution to compassion offered by the Compassion Practice. Sensing the Sacredness is feeling the cosmic expanse of compassion that is capable of healing and holding all wounds. As Christians, we understand and experience this sacredness through the power of the Holy Spirit. “When our hearts open to others’ suffering and a sustaining love flows through us, the veil of the everyday world we live in is pierced and relativized...In those moments, our spirits expand – our capacity to care deepens, our understanding for the plight of another extends, and our patience can seem infinite.”^[26] In these moments we often feel a deep connection to humanity, nature, the universe, or God—we feel connected to something larger than ourselves. We become aware of a deeper reality. Grace abounds.

Embodying new life reminds us that compassion, in addition to grieving with those who suffer, also desires the transformation of their suffering into joy.^[27] ‘Genuine compassion takes as much delight in others’ flourishing as it feels pathos for their pain.’^[28] Compassionate care gives rise to the yearning that wounded persons flourish. “Embodying new life [also] recognizes the gifts and qualities budding within [ourselves], and it longs to see them flourish.”^[29]

Finally, compassion is incomplete and becomes sentimentality if it does not involve restorative action. The last movement, Act, takes some step to ease suffering or promote flourishing. Compassion is restorative. Compassion is not the same as ‘niceness.’ Nor is it weak. Compassion is wisely-shaped, informed, ‘feeling-with’ behavior that will take the form

of tough love or gentleness depending on the situation. Genuine compassion requires courage, accountability, clarity, and truth. Compassion does not try to answer some version of ‘What will help everyone feel good?’ Nor does it demonize or denigrate those who cause harm. Compassion does not seek retribution. Rather, it aims for what will help bring true healing, vitality, and freedom to all involved, victims and perpetrators alike.^[30]

[1] The foundation of our definition of joy emerges from Margaret Farley’s *Just Love*. We understand joy, flourishing, and love to overlap in ways that are discussed in the theology section of this chapter. See Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2008).

[2] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 103-159.

[3] Omi and Winant, 109.

[4] Omi and Winant, 111.

[5] Omi and Winant, 111.

[6] Crenshaw, xxix.

[7] Bonilla-Silva, “Rethinking Racism,” 472.

[8] Omi and Winant, 112.

[9] Omi and Winant, 112.

[10] Ladson-Billings, “What Is Critical Race Theory,” 11.

[11] Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” in Crenshaw et al., *Critical Race Theory*, 357.

[12] Crenshaw, “Intersectionality,” 358.

[13] Stephanie M. Wildman, *Privilege Revealed: How Invisible Preference Undermines America* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 21.

[14] Wildman, 21.

[15] Matsuda, “Looking,” 63-64.

[16] Matsuda, “Looking,” 63.

[17] Frank Rogers, *Practicing Compassion* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2015), 19.

[18] <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/09/us/yale-student-napping-black-trnd/index.html>

[19] Rogers, *Practicing Compassion*, 28.

[20] Dreitcer, *Living Compassion*, 130.

[21] My purpose for using the first person plural possessive determiner 'our' is not to claim credit for this definition of compassion, for which I cannot take credit, but to place myself within this approach and tradition of cultivating compassion.

[22] Rogers, 70.

[23] Rogers, 24.

[24] Rogers, 25.

[25] Rogers, 25.

[26] Rogers, *Practicing Compassion*, 25.

[27] Rogers, 26.

[28] Rogers, 26.

[29] Rogers, 73.

[30] Dreitcer, *Living Compassion*, 30.

Gather

Gather (5 minutes)

Opening Prayer:

- The youth pastor or group leader should open in prayer.
- The prayer should lift up the importance of inner stillness so that we are better able to hear our conscious and the Holy Spirit.

Greeting One Another:

- For this session allow the participants to greet one another in whatever way they commonly do.

Introducing the Session:

- This session builds upon the previous two sessions but specifically focuses on the racial identity of the participant. In the previous two sessions we have learned about being grounded in God's sacred compassion and becoming aware of the many parts that make up our entire selves. In today's session the participants will practice exploring their racial identity and their reactions to their racial part in a grounded compassionate space. It is important to emphasize that they are created in God's image and that God loves them. When viewing our racial identities from this place we can begin to see how our racial identity is a part of what makes us uniquely able to contribute to the Kin-dom of God. Indeed, if God loves us as we are, shouldn't we also love ourselves?

Engage

Engage (30 minutes)

Activity 1: Self-Compassion Towards the Radicalized Parts of Ourselves

- Invite the students to find a comfortable place to write and give them 15 minutes to complete the Compassionately Engaging our Racialized Reactions worksheet (attached below).
- When introducing the sheet, explain to the students how this practice builds upon the capacities developed in the first two weeks and how important it is for us to have compassion for ourselves.
- Have the participants break up into groups of two to reflect on the practice using the questions below. Ask the group to practice contemplative listening while another is sharing – simply holding and receiving the reality of another's experience, whatever that may be. It is critically important the students are told that there is not be any blame, shame or judgment on their reactions. Rather the participants should strive to stay grounded in the soil of compassion and if they find themselves becoming reactive, remember to take the U-turn.

1. What was it like to personify a part
 2. What kind of insights do you gain?
 3. Does it feel generative?
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Reflect

Reflect (20 minutes)

- Reflect on practice as a group. After sharing as pairs has concluded, invite a meta conversation about the practice itself - insights, obstacles, or questions involved in practicing it.
 1. Does this make sense? Was it generative for you? Do you have any new insights about this part of yourself?
 2. Note: If tears arise during a participant's sharing, simply allow them to be. Hold the space by remaining grounded and nonplussed - heavy emotion is natural and normal. Avoid holding the person; praying for them; or drawing undue attention to them - these emerge out of our own discomfort and inadvertently communicate that something is wrong or too difficult to hold.
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Send Forth

Send Forth (5 minutes)

- Sum-It-Up - When closing the session today invite the students to soak in what they have accomplished today. It's not often that we are able to have productive inner-work on issues of race and racism. Remind them of how much they have grown over the past three weeks. Help them see that they should be proud of themselves for taking the time to learn about their racial identity and that of their peers. Lastly, encourage them to use this work as an insight to help them understand how others might be experiencing race and racism as well.
- Closing Prayer