

Stay with us—it's getting dark (Luke 24:13-35)

Compassion and its rationale are so simple.

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In her essay “Human Relations,” Natalia Ginzburg describes, in the first-person plural, our life trajectory—being fixated, as little children, on the “dark and mysterious” world of adults, then losing interest in adults, groveling to the cool kid, dropping her for someone more likeminded, dropping *her* for a bohemian faux-poor lifestyle, becoming actually poor, finding the right person but not realizing that he *is* the right person until we’ve been with him for years, being so wrapped up in our children we forget about our vocation. The essay ends—though “the story of human relationship never ceases”—with us being looked at stony-eyed by our own teenagers. But “by now we know how the long chain of human relationships unwinds its long necessary parabola, and ... we know all the long road we have to travel down in order to arrive at the point where we have a little compassion.” It is not simple to become simple.

Compassion and its rationale are so simple. Stay with us, stranger, because it’s almost evening. Break bread with us, stranger, because you are hungry. Take my coat because you’re cold. Sit down because you’re tired.

Growing up, I knew a family whose father kept a tally of his children’s stars—the stars they were going to be sporting in their crowns when they got to heaven. So far it was Girl 1, Boys 0: The girl had saved one soul, so she was going to have one star in her crown. The boys were duds. The motivation for saving souls was bling.

I don’t know exactly what it means to save a soul, but I think, as Ginzburg suggests, that life itself can save our own souls, teaching us to actually care about people. I am old enough now that my life probably counts as a parabola—as a lifetime—and maybe because I have traveled down a long-enough road, compassion seems the most beautiful thing.

Matthew 15:32, a very simple verse, is one of my favorites lately: “Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, ‘I have compassion for the crowd because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat, and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.’” He has compassion on the people because they are hungry. If he sends them away they might faint. It’s not for glory, or to avoid shame, or to be able to brag, or for salvation or a Las-Vegas-style crown that Jesus feeds the crowd. He feeds them because they are hungry, and then in this week’s gospel reading the two men on the road to Emmaus urge him—a stranger—to stay with them because it is almost evening, and there are no streetlights.

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