

About ten years ago, I was having lunch on the Danville town square and heard a chain saw fire up. When I looked out the window, I noticed some men cutting down a dying tree on the courthouse lawn. It had been planted some 140 years before by Union soldiers from Hendricks County on the day they mustered at the courthouse to leave for war. The men were cutting the trunk into 18-inch lengths, so I went and got one and took it home. Joan saw me wrestle it out of the truck and asked me what I was going to do with it.

I told her I was going to make something nice out of it, maybe a little bench or a clock or maybe leave it like it was and use it as the world's largest doorstep. But I never did any of that. I just put it out by the woodpile and the next winter, when we were running low on firewood, I split it and burned it in our woodstove.

There were 16 men from Fairfield Meeting on the courthouse square that day in 1861, one of whom was named Alfred Ballard, who died of typhoid near Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1863. Now he lies across the road in our cemetery. Alfred Ballard was a thoughtful man, forced to choose between two great virtues of his Quaker religion—pacifism and equality. He struggled on the horns of this dilemma until his lonely and premature death far from home.

In a letter written to his family, in words his family had carved on the back of his tombstone, Alfred Ballard said, “I feel that I have done my duty to God and my Country; and if I fall in the struggle, I hope I will not be lost, but that I will live in a land of peace and pleasures, where there is no war and tribulation to mar our happiness.” (*The Republican*; July 7, 2011; Volume 130, Number 28; Danville, Indiana; p. 2)

We’ve been discussing those aspects of Jesus’ life that don’t often get mentioned—his healthy skepticism of religious and societal institutions, his personal integrity without regard for the judgment and opinion of others, his willingness to acknowledge virtue wherever he found it, his careful attention to those around him, and his ability to relate to a diverse group of people.

When I began this series, I said I wanted to end by talking about a quality Jesus didn’t appear to have. I said Jesus seemed to have an all-or-nothing approach to life that made compromise difficult, if not impossible. I theorized it might have led to his early death. But as I’ve been reading the gospels, I’ve concluded I was wrong. It wasn’t Jesus’ inflexibility that got him killed. He had a marvelous ability to balance twin goods. He valued the Torah, appreciated the law and tradition, but was able to set them aside for a greater good. He demonstrated, time after time, a wise, often remarkable, flexibility.

It wasn't *Jesus'* moral and spiritual rigidity that got him in trouble. It was the moral and spiritual rigidity of his detractors that led to his death. And here is why: while compromise is vital and crucial in healthy relationships, compromise is not usually seen as a spiritual virtue. In fact, in religion, compromise is often seen as selling out, as being lukewarm in our commitment, half-hearted and wishy-washy. Our spiritual heroes tend to be those men and women who took strong stands, who didn't back down, who stood tall, who wouldn't give an inch. Think of all these noble sounding synonyms we have for the words *stubborn* and *unyielding*.

But I believe compromise is a spiritual virtue, and here's why. Compromise is a sign of compassion. It is the recognition that people of good will can sometimes think and feel differently about matters. So rather than insisting on our own way, we say instead, "I don't want to get my way if it means you can't have your way."

Not long ago, Joan and I both had a free afternoon, so we decided to have a little date. Joan wanted to go downtown to Massachusetts Avenue and eat pizza at Bazbeaux and window shop. I wanted to do something a bit more intellectually stimulating, so suggested we visit my friend Charley at the Roachdale Hardware Store.

I really wanted to go see Charley, so I began talking about how Massachusetts Avenue had been around for a hundred years, and would be around for another hundred years.

“But someday,” I told her, “Charley will be dead and we’ll be so glad we spent time with him.”

I won the argument and we went to see Charley at the hardware store. Joan was her usual cheerful self because she’s a great person, but the whole time we were there, I felt like a jerk because I knew I had taken advantage of her kindness to get what I want.

Now when we are having religious disputes and we get our way, we feel good about ourselves and we congratulate ourselves for our faithfulness and persistence and our commitment to God. We seldom say, “I got my way, but boy, I acted like a jerk.” Instead, we interpret our victory as an indication of God’s favor and a confirmation that we were on the side of righteousness. What we often fail to see is that the folks on the other side of the fence were just as sincere, just as concerned, just as committed to their faith as we were to ours.

This is why compromise is a spiritual gift. Because it helps us remember that even those who don’t agree with us are still precious to God, and are, in their own way, trying to be faithful to the Light they’ve been given.

A couple weeks ago, Joan and I were driving through the countryside down by the farmhouse and saw a sign that said, “Hinshaw’s Rocks and Gems.” We’ve always liked rocks, so we turned in the driveway and went in their little shop and it was filled with gorgeous rocks that had been cut and polished. Rocks from all over the world. I began talking with the owner and he asked if I wanted to see his pile of rocks. Sure, I’d love to, I said. So he showed me his rock pile and I noticed a particularly interesting stone that looked like wood. And, indeed, it was petrified wood. Wood turned to rock. This piece had been polished, but had cracked in the process and was thrown on the rock pile.

I asked if I could buy it, so the rock man, Mr. Hinshaw, sold it to me and I took it home and studied it and thought about it. Here’s what I thought as I held it in my hand—I thought how it used to be living, how it used to be alive and growing, but that 150 million years ago intense heat and pressure caused minerals to displace the living cells of a tree and eventually turn it to stone. Then I thought of all the times the same thing had happened to me, how when I was under pressure and feeling heat, I would turn hard and not budge. Now when I did that, I told myself I was being faithful and strong, but the fact of the matter is that the living part of me had stopped growing and rigid stone was displacing vital, living cells. My soul was petrifying.

In my mind, I still looked good, just as that petrified wood looked good, but in reality, in my rigidity I was only fit for the rock pile. And, you know, there isn't much that grows on a rock pile.

Thinking about that rock caused me to have a new insight about compromise.

Compromise isn't weak, it isn't passive. Compromise is fighting back, fighting back against those self-centered impulses which would displace our living souls and harden our hearts. In compromise, we not only say to the other, "Your desires are as important as my own." We also resist the calcification of our spirits, we resist our propensity to think only of ourselves, the tendency of rigid law to displace compassion and love. Thus, compromise isn't weak. It is the conscious decision to fight back against that which would turn our hearts to stone.