

Compassion Story of the Month

With Brattleboro voting overwhelmingly to become part of the international Charter for Compassion, the Reformer and The Commons have agreed to publish a “compassion story of the month.” This is the thirty-first. Information on submissions from Brattleboro area residents is offered below.

Giving Thanks at Thanksgiving: Word from Town Folks

Rev. Dr. Scott Couper

Members of the Centre Congregational Church (United Church of Christ) on Main Street in downtown Brattleboro are thankful that we live in such a vibrant and compassionate community. I accepted a call to Centre Church in part because I adored Brattleboro and my expectations of it were high. I never imagined that my high expectations would be exceeded more and more the longer I lived here. Brattleboro possesses what I believe is a divinely inspired spirituality and eccentricity. Brattleboro is quirky, for its population is made up of hundreds, if not thousands, of people who love the Earth, work for justice, foster the arts, and practice compassion. We are thankful to God that we are a part of this town.

Recently, Centre Church took some steps to distance ourselves from the largely inaccurate history that has been associated with Thanksgiving and its origins. This *mythology*, which sadly was propagated in part by our Congregational ancestors (the Puritans), sugar-coated a cultural and, at times, physical genocide against an entire race of indigenous people who inhabited pre-Brattleboro (the Abenaki) and our entire North American continent. As a faith community, we needed to offer repentance for the nationalism and greed which cloaked itself with Christian theology and so-called ‘benevolent trusteeship’.

To honor the spiritual, rather than the mythological, meaning of Thanksgiving, Centre Church did something highly unusual during the Thanksgiving period. We placed on Main Street – would you call it a confessional? - a piece of furniture resembling a stall or a phone booth in which people in our town could stop, sit, reflect, and, in writing, offer, anonymously, their prayers of thanksgiving. Centre Church could then reflect on these ‘prayers’ in worship and in thanksgiving.

At first, I thought ‘this is a wackadoodle idea’. I thought, ‘This will never succeed’. But then I reconsidered. I am in Brattleboro, after all. And it’s become clear to me that the citizens of Brattleboro are, well, of “different ilk”.

So we did it, and I found myself emptying a vase full of notes every hour for days. Talk about wondrous! Thank you, Brattleboro, for being so marvelously and beautifully eccentric. Thank you for being such an appreciative people. Thank you for being such a compassionate people. There’s no question at all that we live in a compassionate community.

Here are just a few of the notes - - some of what folks in our community are thankful for:

Loaves and Fishes soup kitchen and St. Bridget's soup kitchen

The Brooks Library! A community that tries to be faithful and compassionate.

Thanks for keeping a beautiful church up and running on Main Street.

I love your gardens all summer!

I'm thankful for life.

May we be truly thankful and act accordingly, for this one, real, only living planet.

I give thanks for being shown the way to a new mode of expression that I love – in my 70s!

I am thankful for my God who will never leave [me] despite all my shortcomings. For my family, my friends, my boyfriend. People who take the "Be the hands and feet" seriously in their lives.

Every day is a gift.

I am grateful for my life, for the earth, the sky and all its amazing creatures, for thoughtful people and all the kind words that are given and share[d].

Family coming together – a blessing (safe travels!)

Health, even though it can be challenging to accept new limitations.

True friends.

Jelly donuts.

I'm thankful that God "so loved the world" that he founded the church to proclaim that love.

All the beautiful people of Vermont (even those who might think of themselves as physically less beautiful).

I'm thankful for my friends and family. That God has brought me this far and, throughout my darkest moments, continues to show me the light.

Thank God for reminding me that I am always loved.

Submissions, from Brattleboro area residents, for future publication, not to exceed 650 words, should be emailed to: compassionstory@gmail.com or mailed to: Compassion Story of the Month, PO Box 50, Marlboro, VT 05344. Please include your name, address, phone number and email address. Earlier submitted stories will automatically be considered in subsequent months.