

August 6, 2017
Romans 9:1-5
Matthew 14:13-21

The Biggest Miracle: Compassion

Five thousand men, not counting the women and children in that crowd.

That number would frighten any caterer. That many mouths to feed would require weeks of planning, Five thousand people minimum. And the miracle of our story is that Jesus takes a few loaves of bread and some fish and feeds them all. At least five thousand are filled and there are even baskets of leftovers. What a wonder that Jesus can take the little we have and turn it into a feast. With Jesus, our scarcity becomes abundance. Our 'not enough' becomes more than enough with Jesus. It is a miracle of the story. But today, I want us to consider another miracle in this story. The miracle of compassion.

I know, it doesn't seem like compassion is the main point of the story. I mean, we've got a hungry multitude, fed by what essentially amounts to a Happy Meal. Jesus proves he has amazing wonder-working power.

And the compassion part of the story is nice, but it's not amazing. But, I want us to notice today, how amazing it is. In fact, I'd say the compassion Jesus has is one of the most amazing things in the story. The

compassion here is critical. Because we can talk about Jesus' miracles all day. We can talk about how amazing God is and how Jesus feeds people and heals people and how our church does that and is part of that. We can talk about that all day long, but if there's no compassion in what we are doing, then what ARE we doing? Because the gospel makes it clear. That it's not WHAT Jesus does that truly matters, it's WHY he does it. And why he does it, why he heals and feeds the multitude, is because of his compassion. Because he looks at our lonely, hurting world and he says to himself, that could be me.

Compassion is about putting yourself in someone else's shoes.

Compassion means hurting with, enduring with, suffering with. That's what the root of the Latin word 'compassio' means. And the Greek word for compassion means feeling something in the pit of your stomach. In our reading, it literally says that Jesus is gut-wrenched when he looks at the crowd in front of him. He is moved deep inside. He has compassion for them.

Now it may not seem miraculous for Jesus to have compassion. He's the Son of God after all. He's Jesus. He is supposed to have compassion.

But let's back up in our story to see where Jesus is coming from and where he is going and why. You probably noticed in the first verse we read today, that Jesus thinks he is going to a deserted place. He's going to be by himself because he has 'heard the news'. And just what was that news? Well, it was the news that John the Baptist had been killed by King Herod. Decapitated to impress a dancing girl named Salome. John the Baptist was Jesus' friend and his cousin and his mentor; the most sincere, and holy, and prophetic person Jesus knew. And he had been murdered by an impulsive, selfish king. It was devastating for Jesus, I imagine. And it was terrifying to think of what would happen next. And the questions and the anger that Jesus felt and the sorrow and the grief were all swirling around in his head.

So Jesus went to find a deserted place, to be alone, to think and pray. Even Jesus needed a moment to tend to his overburdened spirit. And don't we all? Don't we all need to get away sometimes, to take a time out from the world, to get away from the needs and demands of life, just to sort things through with God?

Jesus needed time in a deserted place. He just needed some time. But that's not what he gets. Because the people are desperate to see Jesus. They need him to do miracles. They need him to heal and to help. He's their last chance in this world where there are few chances at life. Where they are powerless against disease and selfish kings. So they find out where he is going and they go there too. And they wait for him to arrive. And when he does, when Jesus arrives and sees all those people, can you imagine how he felt? When he saw the need of the world, waiting for him? When he was worn out and emotionally fried and in need of a rest? Don't you think Jesus just wanted to send the crowd away, to tell them to go and come back another time? And yet, Jesus doesn't. He looks at the crowd from his own place of hurt and helplessness and he has compassion.

Jesus looks at the crowd. And he sees their hurt and recognizes that hurt. He sees that worry and he knows that worry. Because his life had been hard too, because his heart had been broken too, and he felt compassion. He looked at the crowd and said, that could be me.

The story goes that Mahatma Gandhi had led a privileged life. His family was wealthy and well-connected. He had received the best education. As a young man, he was an up and coming lawyer in the British empire. But one day traveling in South Africa, he experienced the prejudice that his fellow Indians faced every day, when he was thrown off a train because he was a colored man sitting in the white first-class section. Suddenly Gandhi knew how it felt to be treated as a second-class human being and within a week, he began his campaign for Indian equality.

Compassion is knowing that another person's experience could be yours. That hurt could be yours. That loneliness could be yours. That sickness or suffering, that could just as easily be yours. So how would you want someone to treat you? Jesus looked at the crowd before him, and he had compassion. Because he knew that could be him. He recognized that anxiety. He recognized that need for God's help. He knew it and he knew it since the beginning of his life on earth. Jesus knew what it was like to be homeless in a manger in Bethlehem. He knew what it was like to have to flee violence as a refugee to Egypt. He knew what it was like

to experience the shame of small town rumors in Nazareth. He knew the disgrace of never being good enough for others. And never being Jewish enough. Never being Roman enough. Never being settled down enough or put together enough or normal enough. Jesus knew how it felt to be outside of God's circle of blessing. He knew. And he knew that's why the crowds had come and why he had come too. God had sent him to have compassion. To show people they were enough, that they deserved to have enough.

It's why Jesus came. It's the 'why' of his mission. It's the why of his teachings, to have compassion. Do unto others as you would have them do to you. Love your neighbor as yourself. It is why we are here. To recognize the pain and the humanity of others and imagine ourselves in their shoes. To affirm Jesus has been in those shoes too. To lose someone you love. To feel helpless in the face of disease. To care for aging parents or a child with special needs. To fear the drugs and gun violence overtaking your community. To live on minimum wage with the stress of multiple jobs and what if you get sick and how will you take care of your family and when will things get better? Maybe we can

imagine what that's like. And maybe we don't have to. Maybe we already know. Maybe we know what it's like to be in someone else's shoes. It reminds me of Abby Drane, the CEO of Uspiritus, the home for abused and neglected kids. Abby grew up in the foster care system herself and when she visited us last December, she told us how rough it was to grow up like that, without parents, without a home; feeling lost and unwanted and unloved. She knew what it was like to be a kid like that. And her compassion for the kids there today is what drives her to fight for them.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Do unto others as you would have them do to you. Have compassion. It's why we do what we do. It's why Jesus does what he does. But the disciples in our story, they are thinking of what's practical, bless their hearts. In that deserted place, Jesus accepted the crowd and healed the sick in the crowd. And as late afternoon approached the disciples said to Jesus, "It's getting late. This is a deserted place, Jesus. Send the crowds away, Jesus. Send them away, so they can get some food. Because there is nothing here." It's a sensible suggestion. Because there isn't enough there. The disciples know how

this will go. You and I know how this will go. We know how demanding and unreasonable people can be when they don't have enough. It's better to send them away.

“No, Jesus says, no, don't send them away. YOU give them something to eat. YOU feed them. YOU have compassion. Don't send them away.”

There is an uncomfortable challenge here for the disciples and for us as the church. In a world where it is easy to send people away. To send them away from our doors. From our neighborhoods. From our school districts. From our churches. From our health care. Send them away because we can't deal it. Send away the hunger and the need. There isn't enough here. Everyone just needs to toughen up, we say. Toughen up, we say to the world. Toughen up, we say to ourselves. Don't be weak. Don't be needy. Don't ask for anything. Don't ask God. Don't ask anyone.

A few years ago, there was a death in our family. And following the funeral service, the church offered to provide a lunch for us. I said, “Oh, I don't think they don't need to do that. We don't have to have that.

That sounds like such an imposition. We don't want to bother anyone.”

But the minister said, “Oh no, these people want to do this. They look forward to caring for those who are grieving. They look forward to putting out the sandwich platters and the pea salads and the Jellos and homemade brownies. They want to do it. Because, someone did it for them. Because when their loved ones died, this same group made a meal for their families. And now they want to do it for you. Because they know what this is like. And this is what you need.” And I didn’t know it, but I did. I needed that meal. I needed that compassion.

Just like we need the compassion of this meal at this table. We may not know it, but we need it. We need God’s healing and God’s grace and God’s understanding of what life is like. We need Jesus’ compassion for all the pain we try to bear ourselves. And we would send that part of ourselves away. We don’t want to impose. We don’t want to be hungry. Stay, Jesus says. Don’t go. You need to be healed by God. You need to be fed by God. And there is more than enough here for you and for everyone. It’s why I’m here. To share life with you.

Jesus does miracles. Through him, marvelous things happen. The sick are healed. The hungry are fed. Those who mourn are comforted. God

takes the 'not enough' that we have and makes it more than enough.

Because God knows us. God understands. God has walked in our shoes in Jesus Christ. So let us do the same for others. Let us love our neighbors as ourselves. Let us do unto others as God has done to us.