

Compassion: A Call to Action

The Feeding of the 5000

Mark 6:30-44
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Last Sunday, we focused on the portion of Mark 6 where Jesus tells his weary over-worked disciples to “come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” (v. 31). We explored the importance of finding balance between labor and rest. After emphasizing the need for rest and renewal – physically, mentally, and spiritually – our biblical story reveals the flip side of the coin of faithful discipleship. **There is a time for rest and renewal, and there is a time for work and ministry.** The gospel writer does this in a way that is very instructive and helpful in understanding what discipleship is all about.

As Jesus and his disciples get into a boat to head to a deserted place to rest a while, a large crowd gathers and follows them along the shore. This is where the story turns on a dime. We're told, “As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (v. 34). **Jesus had compassion for them. This is what leads to the familiar story known as the Feeding of the 5000.**

It is compassion that serves as a call to action – Jesus', his disciples, and ours. An understanding of our call to compassion (compassion is literally defined as “to suffer with”) begins with something implied but not actually mentioned in this story. That something is empathy. **Empathy**, a much more modern word than compassion, **is the ability of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another.** Empathy is often described as being able to put oneself into the shoes of another. You hear it in a statement like, “I feel your pain and sorry.” Or, “I rejoice in your accomplishment.” **It is empathy Jesus felt for the crowd that leads to his compassion for them.**

Empathy and compassion aren't exactly the same thing, though they are closely related.

*Compassion and empathy both refer to a caring response to someone else's distress. “While **empathy** refers to an active **sharing in the emotional experience** of the other person, **compassion** adds to that emotional experience **a desire to alleviate the person's distress.** (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)*

It is compassion, then, which is deeper than a feeling, that serves as **a call to action – to actually do something to help another.** And that's exactly what Jesus does for the crowd that has gathered.

What I like most about Mark's version of this story, which is the only miracle story found in all four gospels, is the emphasis on **our role in participating with God in acts of compassion.** In any biblical story concerning Jesus, it is important to search out the ethical implications and expectations of us as followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this the cost of discipleship.

So, let's start again. When Jesus went ashore and saw the great crowd, his immediate reaction was to have compassion for them. From this, we learn that **the nature and character of God is one of compassion and concern for all**. God as the Sacred Presence that is beyond, among, and within us and all of creation. That compassion includes our well-being, and your well-being.

For Jesus, and for us, **feelings and emotions of empathy are just the starting point. They should then act as motivation to take the next step**. Jesus put his compassion into *action* by actually ministering to the needs of the crowd. **Compassion, in the biblical sense, is a desire and effort to actually help ease and alleviate the hurt and suffering of others**. And as revealed in this story, not only our spiritual and emotional well-being, but also for our physical well-being, as the actual feeding of the crowd attests, alleviating their hunger.

What, then, does this story have to say about us as followers of Jesus? For one, **just as Jesus' compassion was the motivation for his ministry, so it was for his disciples, and so it must be for us**. In fact, the third bullet point of our College Hill Mission Statement reads: "Reaching out with a *compassionate* voice for peace and justice." That involves taking action. We learn what many of us already know and experience, that **compassion for others can be contagious!**

Following Jesus' lead, the disciples become concerned about the lateness of the hour and the lack of available food for the large crowd of people. The disciples' *solution* to the problem, however, is much different than Jesus'. The disciples think it best to send the crowd away, so that everyone can go to nearby towns and eat, thereby taking care of their own needs. That's a very rational and reasonable solution. But to their surprise, Jesus tells them something pivotal to the meaning of this story, "You give them something to eat" (v.37). The disciples predictably respond out of a perspective of scarcity.

Here, then, something important for us to reflect upon. **Is it possible that the disciples represent our own desire, at least from time to time, to "send away" others so that they can find help on their own, thus removing ourselves from the equation? Like the disciples, are we not often tempted to believe that our meager resources (individually, or as a congregation) don't amount to much of anything either – so why bother, especially with so many people in need all around us?** I must admit that I continue to struggle to some extent with what to do for folks who knock on the church door for help. Though sometimes skeptical, I also hear in my head Jesus' emphatic statement from this miracle story, "YOU give them something..." I am reminded that for Jesus, compassion is accompanied with action, not just limited to thoughts and prayers. Therefore, I most often err on the side of grace and generosity.

From a practical standpoint, then, this biblical story encourages us to move beyond an all-too-common emphasis on what we don't have, rather than on what we do have. For this story reveals that **God uses even the very little we have to offer to minister in powerful ways to others**. Over the years, ministries of peace and justice have taught us to focus more on what's called a theology of abundance, rather than on a theology of scarcity, which still dominates our culture when our mindset gets stuck in a zero-sum game. **When we focus on scarcity, our anxiety level rises** – like when we reflect upon how much less money we have at the end of each month after paying our ever-increasing bills.

Here's where our scripture reading can offer us some guidance. In today's biblical text the disciples express their anxiety and concern for the needs of the crowd.

They bring those needs and concerns to Jesus. **We, too, in our concern for others and ourselves, can bring those things to God.** Yes, the Sacred Presence in our midst is already aware of our needs and concerns, but there is still **something transformative when we share that in the context of our relationship with God.** Yet, like Jesus' response to the disciples, sometimes God answers our prayers with: **You do something about it,** knowing that God's Presence always goes with and within us. Perhaps God is saying to us:

- I've provided you with food, distribute some of it to others.
- I've provided you with finances, donate some to those in need.
- I've provided you with time and abilities, volunteer them to the good of the church, family, and the community.

God will use and bless what we bring, even if it's only five loaves and two fish. That's because God is in the abundance business, not scarcity. Therefore, let us emphasize and focus on what we *have*, not on what we *don't* have. Let us see possibilities and opportunities, not just problems and seemingly overwhelming challenges. And like the disciples who were motivated by their compassion and instructed to take action themselves, let us respond in a like manner with each other, and especially with those in need.

Hear and live out Jesus' words, "You give them something..." That's our call to be a community of compassion, our call to action.

Amen.