

August 3, 2014
Isaiah 55:1-5
Matthew 14:13-21

It Starts with Compassion

It all started with Jesus trying to get away from it all. He had withdrawn from everyone and everything. He had taken a boat and he was headed out for a deserted place, far away from civilization. He just wanted to be alone. He just needed a break from the world.

Jesus wanted to get away because he had just gotten some terrible news.

John the Baptist, his friend, his cousin, his spiritual companion had been killed by King Herod. Herod had been holding John in prison on some trumped-up charges. And then there was a wild party at the palace one evening. And after a few too many glasses of wine and some lascivious dancing, King Herod found himself making a very unwise promise. And so it was that John the Baptist's head ended up on a silver platter. How shocking, the people said. How barbaric. How unfortunate for John. But wasn't that the way of the world? The powerful never had much compassion.

When Jesus heard about John, he needed to get away. He needed to take a break. This terrible news about John came right after a very bad day at

Nazareth his hometown. Just days before, the people he had grown up with had rejected him and his ministry. “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son?” they said. “Isn’t this Mary’s little boy? Who does he think he is? Why does he think he’s so smart? You’re nothing special,” they had said. “You are nothing special, Jesus of Nazareth.” And Jesus heart broke and his spirit deflated. And he couldn’t do any deeds of power in his own hometown, so he had to leave. He had to leave his own community. And now this terrible news about John. All Jesus wanted to do was to get away from the terrible world and the terrible people in it. He had no heart for anyone right now because, evidently, no one had a heart for him.

It all started with Jesus trying to get away from it all. From the cruelty and the suffering and the disappointing, cold-hearted, nastiness of the world. And he went to find a deserted place to be alone. He didn’t take any of his followers or even his closest disciples. He went so he could leave everything and everyone behind. But what he found when he got that place not no one. What he found was the exact opposite. Instead

getting away from the world, Jesus found whole world was there, waiting for him.

Imagine seeing the crowds lining the shore. Imagine how Jesus felt. I can imagine how I would feel if I were Jesus. I can imagine sighing and thinking, “Great. More people. More exhausting people.” And I can imagine forcing a smile while inwardly cursing the crowd that has ruined my vacation. And I can also imagine myself saying to the crowds as I get close to shore, ‘UH-OH, you know what? I think I left the stove on at home,’ and then quickly turning my boat around and paddling away. I can imagine doing that myself. And can’t we all, really? Can’t we imagine trying to escape, when the world crowds in and we feel overwhelmed and we just can’t handle one more thing because of the crap-tacular week we have had. We could understand if Jesus ran away or if he sent the crowds away. But Jesus doesn’t do either of those things.

When Jesus sees the crowds of people that have shown up out of nowhere in this nowhere place, he doesn’t run from them or send them away. The first thing Jesus does when he sees the crowds, is he has

compassion for them. He doesn't see them and resent them. He doesn't see them and tell them to get help somewhere else. He doesn't let the bad news in his life become the bad news in their lives. The first thing Jesus does, is he has compassion.

Compassion is a powerful word. And we might use the word without thinking about how powerful it is. When we talk about someone having compassion, we mean they are nice. They are kind. They are thoughtful. When they give you a can of Coke, they do not shake it up before giving it to you. They do not post that angry reply on facebook, even though they really, really want to.

When someone has compassion, it means something more than that. It literally means suffering with someone. That's what the pieces of the word in Latin mean; to suffer with. The Greek word that is translated into compassion is *sympathei*, which is an even more interesting word. Directly translated it means you are 'moved in your inward parts', specifically, in your bowels. Because that's where emotions were located in Jesus' time. They didn't come from your heart primarily, they came from your guts. So when Jesus sees the crowd, when he pulls into

his not-so-deserted, deserted place; and when he sees all the people. And how desperate they were to have trailed him out into the middle of nowhere on the slim-to-none chance that they might find him, and how, even so, he might send them away. When he sees how much they want healing and peace and hope and redemption and new life. When Jesus sees the crowds and their suffering and that life has been crappy for them too, it hits him right in the guts. He sees that feeling and he knows that feeling. And Jesus has compassion.

Compassion is where it all starts with Jesus. It is where Jesus begins with the crowds. It's where Jesus begins with us. That's the life of Christ. Seeing the suffering of others and suffering alongside them. Not turning away from the world or hiding from the world and its pain, but letting it hit us in the guts. As followers of Christ, our job is not to avoid suffering. But to have compassion. To recognize and desire healing for others. To be gracious and patient and generous in the most terrifying way possible. Because it's terrifying to think of all the pain and all the suffering and all the need out there. It's terrifying that Jesus goes out there into it. Even when he tries to get away from it, it's where he ends

up. And it's terrifying that that's where he stays. And it's where he invites us to stay as well. To leave behind our quiet, self-controlled lives for a life with others, a suffering-alongside, compassionate life.

Jesus' compassion is terrifying. And Jesus' disciples were terrified of it too. They were terrified of what he was doing and how to manage it.

When they finally found Jesus in that deserted place with the huge crowd, night was falling. And that's not a good situation to be in. Out in the middle of nowhere. With no resources and no grocery store, and no 911 to call in case of an emergency. The disciples are terrified. For the crowds, and for themselves, and for Jesus. They can't manage this. They can't take care of everyone or provide for everyone. They have to send the crowds away so they can find food for themselves. It is the compassionate thing to do.

The disciples see all the need and the suffering. And they see all they cannot do. They see a situation they cannot fix. And that Jesus cannot fix and they want to protect him. They want to protect their Jesus. This crowd isn't good for him. This week has been terrible. "Just look how tired he is. How exhausted. Look at how much the crowd wants from

him. Jesus needs a break. He needs a rest. He needs someone to protect him and send the crowds away.”

Like the disciples, we try to protect Jesus sometimes. We try to shelter him. We try to keep him safe. We want people to come to him, but not to bother him. We want people to seek him, but not too hard. We want people to need Jesus, but not too much. Because we try not to need Jesus too much. Because we think we ought to be able to handle it ourselves. But if we don't receive Jesus' compassion; if we don't allow Jesus to suffering with us, then we will not be able to suffering with others. We will not have any compassion to give. “Jesus, send the crowds away. Send the needy away. Send the hungry away. Let them find food for themselves.” How often do we try to protect Jesus or save Jesus from the suffering of the world?

Jesus does not need us to protect him from the needs out there. He does not need us to keep him safe. And in that deserted place, Jesus tells his disciples to rethink things. To rethink who he is and how they treat all those people in need. Jesus tells his practical and understandably

terrified disciples, “The crowds don’t need to go away. You give them something to eat.”

I imagine that after Jesus said that, there was a great big moment of silence among the disciples. Matthew doesn’t mention one, but I imagine there was one; a great, big huge pause as the terrified disciples stare at Jesus. “YOU give them something to eat? What do you mean-- YOU give them something to eat? We have nothing but five loaves of bread and two fish. YOU give them something to eat? We have nothing, no resources, no supplies, no way to help this enormous crowd. YOU give them something to eat? How in the world are we supposed to do that?”

The disciples tell Jesus: We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish. We have nothing here, but not enough. We have nothing here, but.... maybe you, like me, have found yourself saying that to Jesus too. We have nothing here to do anything with. We have nothing here to help the suffering of the world, Jesus. We have nothing here but... a life with a schedule that leaves us with too few hours in the day. We have nothing here but a budget stretched too thin. We have nothing here but the most

limited of abilities. We can just barely cook toast and balance our checkbook and make good enough grades and we just manage to say hi to our neighbors. But we have nothing here for your mission. We have nothing here.

That's what we tell Jesus. Because we are terrified. We are terrified for Jesus and for ourselves and that this compassion is too much for us. We can't handle this. We don't have the resources. We can't do it ourselves. But that's really the point, isn't it? We can't do this by ourselves. This isn't about what we have. It's about what Jesus has. It's not about what we can do. It's about what Jesus can do with our little supply of bread and fish. We might feel like we have nothing, but we do have Jesus. The One who created the world. Who is the Morning star, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. The Lord of Life who has defeated death and opened up the gates of heaven and shown us that above all, our God is a God of compassion. This mission is his. This church is his. This life is his. Because he can take a little bit of nothing, and bless it and break it and he give it back to the world so it can do something miraculous. So that all may eat and be filled. What compassion does

God seek to give to us? And how are we called to be compassionate to the suffering, the sick, the stranger, the very old and the very young, the Muslim, the Jew, the undocumented child, the convicted felon, the lost and alone and in need of a chance to meet the God of healing and hope. At this table, we take a little bit of bread and it does something miraculous. We take a little bit of hope and it becomes healing. We take a little bit of faith and it becomes salvation. Because here suffering does not have the last word. Our Lord Jesus does. So come, take and eat. You need not go away. Come, take and eat and be filled with the bread of Christ's compassion.