



Sermon for the Eighth Sunday of Pentecost Season, August 2020

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Genesis 32:22-31](#)

[Psalm 17:1-7,16](#)

[Romans 9:1-5](#)

[Matthew 14:13-21](#)

Compassion. This is at the heart of today's readings. We hear Paul stirred with compassion for his own people. We see Jacob wrestling and, in the midst, crying out for blessing – and then being blessed as an act of compassion. We see compassion come alive in Jesus at work amongst thousands of people.

This feeding of 5000 – probably more like 15000 – comes in Matthew's gospel just after another feast, the feasting at Herod's palace that resulted in the killing of John the Baptist.

This party that emerges from generous outpouring of seeking and welcoming and finding and embracing and inviting – all happen on the heels of the murder of John the Baptist at a party of boasting and besting and machismo and manipulation and lust and entrapment and face-saving that resulted in literally taking off another person's face.

Jesus is stirred powerfully by John's murder by Herod. He seeks solace in retreat, to prayer and being alone to sift through the pain and anguish.

But people are hungry for what they have found with him. They follow, even on foot around the shore, as he sails to a secluded spot. They collect people along the way, hungry as well but not aware until now of how hungry they are.

And, when he gets to shore, there they are.

Maybe this is God the Father's answer to Jesus' anguish, pain, and deep prayer at the injustice and cruelty he has just learned of, as it took the life of his second cousin. "See, dear Son, there are so many who carry sorrow and pain, anxiety and uncertainty, brokenness in body and in spirit."

And so Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, is stirred with compassion and pulled toward all the people by compassion.

Compassion is feeling and suffering *with*, being stirred along *with*. That's, of course, from its Latin roots. Its Greek counterpart in the New Testament means being moved from deep in our guts (our heart, or in the old King James Version, the bowels of our being), our deepest and tenderest parts. This specific word for compassion is a word used about Jesus or in Jesus' own teaching in many places in the Gospels – especially here in the stories of feeding thousands of people, but also in close and personal ways like when Jesus met the woman grieving and weeping because her only son had died, and in his teaching about the Samaritan who found the wounded man on the side of the road, and in his teaching about the father who saw the wayward son returning in rags.

In all of these, the pattern is the same. First, one is moved and stirred with compassion toward others – and one is tugged toward others with deep care. And that deep care moves one quickly into action.

Here at the seaside, Jesus sees the thousands of people who have followed him, who have been eager to approach him with their hopes and yearnings. And he wells up with compassion toward them and is drawn toward them with deep care. And he leaps into action, curing them of their sicknesses and illnesses.

We have heard the witnesses of medical heroes these days who have stepped into the storm of this coronavirus pandemic, who day after day put on masks and protective clothes to care for and attempt to cure those who have been taken down terribly by the virus. We have heard how they have wrestled with the weight of their decision, as it has meant isolation from their families. And we have heard how they have explained to their families, their children, how they feel called and compelled to continue leaping into action. Because it is their calling – and their calling comes right straight out of their compassion, the stirring of care in their deepest, tenderest parts for others.

If you want to taste the kingdom of God, it is this. It is the stirring wave of compassion for others that rises behind and around you like a great ocean wave, and you kick forward and give yourself to that wave and ride the wave so that it takes you where you are being pulled to go – toward others, with others, giving and sharing all you can with others.

You can glimpse the kingdom of God by watching and seeing others. The disciples watch and take it in how Jesus responds, even in his own sorrow about John the Baptist's murder, even when he wanted to run. Then, as the day moves on, they offer an observation – "Jesus, it is late in the day, and these people are no doubt hungry." There's a bit of empathy and concern in what they say, and maybe it's that they themselves are hungry, too.

Observing and watching can give us a glimpse and awaken a spark of concern. But the disciples are not yet fully seeing, as people who themselves are part of the story. They are detached. So, they are observers. They are not yet actors. So, they only know how to observe and suggest something that doesn't require them to do something. "Send them away so they can get themselves some food."

How often are our prayers like this? How often are our responses to people like this? How may our political views and ideas be shaped by this kind of thinking? "Let them go find jobs for themselves – something meaningful to do." "Let them go to the unemployment office to get funds to survive and pay their bills." "Shouldn't their families step in and help them?" "Where are the government-funded workers to help them?" We problem-solve their immediate situation away, throwing responsibility away from us like a hot potato – you know, the old game of "hot potato" where you try to get the thing being thrown away from you so that it lands with someone else?

The disciples have observed and diagnosed something correctly. But they have chosen to look for solutions elsewhere.

But Jesus opens a completely different door. “You give them something to eat. You.”

Do what YOU can. Five loaves, two fish. 15,000 people. Go!

This is a shift from simply descriptive thinking to prescription – beyond “this is what is happening, something should be done,” and moving directly into “let’s see what we can do right now, here, about this.” It is a movement of the will, of the heart, straight from the guts that gets our legs and arms and feet and hands moving with purpose.

Now, none of this would have happened if people had not drawn near to each other. People sought and followed Jesus, and they were there waiting to meet him. Jesus didn’t send them away. Jesus was stirred in his deepest inner self with feeling their realities, their lives, their sufferings, their experiences. He opened himself to them in heart and mind – and he opened himself in action. Jesus then invited the disciples to follow the same path – to open themselves and what they had to share, even if it was small. And the disciples opened themselves to the possibility of God’s movement and power, and they opened themselves in compassion and action for the many, many people around them.

You give them something to eat.

Open yourself. Ride this wave – Here it is, now!

What is the great suffering we are seeing today in the world around us, here in north Idaho and the inland Northwest? What is the deep stuff we are sensing in people’s lives across our nation? What have we observed?

Suspicion Anger Fear Defensive hostility

Why? What is it that is the deep thing going on in people? What are we saying to God in our prayers about our society, our nation – our families, our neighbors, our towns?

“They are feeling unheard. Let them go find a place where they are heard and respected.”

“They are feeling blamed and shamed. Let them find a place where they are honored with full dignity for who they are.”

“They are wounded and scarred from years, decades, centuries of abuse and neglect. Let them find places of healing, of full welcome, of respect, of space without barriers to thrive.”

So, now, what does Jesus say to us?

“You give them these things. YOU. You listen and give them respect. You raise their heads. You make good space for them to thrive.”

They – all of “they” – are us.

Every single one, a Jacob wrestling with angels and demons and God. Every single one, in the wilderness, arriving alone. Every single one, dreading something ahead. Every single one, carrying the weight of the past. Wrestling, not ready to let go, crying out for a blessing.

Thousands are seeking and looking. They are here. At the shoreline. Here. In the hills. Here. In the towns and cities. And there, alone, just across the river, alone – the Jacob apart from others, facing things inside in the dark.

And Jesus saw, and had compassion.

We see. Jesus says to us, “It’s your turn. You see. Now, what do you have to give? Ride the wave – let compassion guide your steps and propel you into action.”