

Compassion

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

³⁰ The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴ As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things....

⁵³ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. ⁵⁴ When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵ and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶ And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Today's scripture is about busyness and compassion. "For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat" (v. 31). Is this not a succinct description of the lives of many people today? Too busy to pause for a real lunch, young professionals munch on vending-machine fare while working at their desks. Teens grab a bagel for breakfast on the way out the door to school. Parents and children drive through a succession of fast-food restaurants between after-school lessons and sports practices. Commuters sip double lattes on the early morning drive, gnaw on baby carrots between meetings, and pick up takeout on the way home. Toddlers graze on cereal pieces and other portable finger foods so that meal schedules need not control the timing of family shopping trips. We are a people besieged by activities and responsibilities that reshape even basic functions of life such as eating. Our busyness prevents us from gathering for family meals, and we may even forget that we enjoy stopping to eat together, especially when we find pleasure and fulfillment in many of the other activities that make up our day.

But what happens if Christians become too busy to come away and break bread together? Our text suggests that gathering as a faith community to rest from our labors

and partake of a common meal is an important part of life together. Jesus offered a cautionary word to his disciples and the contemporary church. We need times when we return from our individual activities—even those activities done in the name and for the sake of Jesus—and re-form ourselves as the body of Christ. Otherwise, we may be broken and poured out so often that we struggle to be useful as Christ's hands and feet in the world. We may become so caught up in the busyness of ministry that we forget to spend time with the One who would direct our ministry, teaching, helping, and justice-seeking endeavors.

The reflections of an eighteenth-century spiritual director might be helpful as we wrestle with the question of knowing what God wants us to do. Jean-Pierre de Caussade wanted to understand how Christians might know what God would have them to do in each moment of every day. He taught that God reveals Godself in each moment, but that Christians must learn to pay attention to God's presence and surrender ourselves continually to God's will. Such surrender requires that Christians trust God to provide for all our needs, whether through times of spiritual retreat or through God's ministry during outward-directed activities. De Caussade writes, "Everything turns to bread to nourish me, soap to wash me, fire to purify me, and a chisel to fashion me in the image of God. Grace supplies all my needs." While God calls us to renewal through communal practices of Sabbath keeping, Holy Communion, and quiet reflection, God also pledges to sustain us when the needs of others interrupt our plans for retreat. Our scripture encourages us to recognize the extent to which the world is suffering and in need of Christian practices of compassion. **Karen Marie Yust**

As we consider compassion, two other *fundamental* questions emerge: (1) How does our God view the world? (2) How does our God ask *you* to view the world? These are really two parts of the same question, for people's attitudes toward the world invariably mirror their underlying conceptions of deity—or the lack thereof. In technical terms, ethics flow from theology.

This passage of Scripture contains, in its briefest and most contextually pertinent form, the answer that Christians give—or *ought to give!*—to this two-sided question. It is stated in this one key verse: "he saw a great crowd; and he had *compassion* for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (v. 34). The term "compassion" is explicitly used of Jesus' attitude toward human beings in at least eight Gospel references, and it is *implicit* in the entire witness to his life, including his healing ministry. Since for Christians Jesus, supremely, is revelatory of God and indeed God's unique representative in history, compassion must be said to be of the essence of the One who created us and before whom all life is lived.

This is no mean claim, to be brushed over lightly! For, as religious history demonstrates, compassion is not the most common or popular concept that human beings have used to describe their sense of the divine attitude toward the world. Far from it! For many religions, both primitive and recent, God or deities have been regarded, to one degree or another, as ominous, wrathful, vengeful, angry, vindictive—approachable, therefore, only through carefully devised and guarded ritual supervised by a priestly caste. Christianity has itself been no stranger to such theologies.

It is no accident that compassion is used so naturally of Jesus. For it is of the very essence of the prophetic traditions of ancient Israel. Abraham Heschel said: "To the prophet ... God does not reveal himself in an abstract absoluteness, but in a personal and intimate relation to the world. He does not simply command and expect obedience; He is also moved and affected by what happens in the world.... God is concerned about the world and shares its fate. Indeed, this is the essence of God's moral nature: His willingness to be intimately involved in the history of man." The passion of the Redeemer is nothing more or less than the incarnation of the God of Israel, the Creator.

But Bonhoeffer reminds us that "Compassion" must not be turned into "cheap grace." Heinrich Heine said: "God has pity on us—what else would God do?"; "God will pardon me, that's His business." Compassion quite literally means "with-suffering;" but most of

us do not hear it. We think it a synonym for pity. Pity is something you can manage from afar—at a once-remove! Not compassion. You do not have compassion, really, unless you *suffer with* those to whom you refer. The precondition for compassion is unconditional solidarity with the ones for whom you feel it.

But here we are at the very center of our faith! Jesus' compassion for the crowd, sheep without a shepherd, was not condescension. It is the mark of his *identification* with his kind, and it did not achieve its full expression until, at Golgotha, he had gone all the way—identifying with our lot not only in birth and life, but also in death. For Christians, this is not just a "statement" about a good, generous, and loving human being, Jesus of Nazareth. It is a statement about God—namely, the Source of our lives and of all life, the One before whom we live out our days and are accountable. As recipients of such compassion, we contradict our own being—our "*new being*"—if we fail to enact the same compassion. **Douglas John Hall**

Both segments of this text suggest that the church belongs in the world rather than cloistered in church buildings set apart from the hustle and bustle of daily living. Jesus and the disciples encountered people in need as part of their movement from place to place, not by establishing a central location and waiting for people to make their way to them. Healing takes place when the faith community and those with whom we minister reach out to one another in mutual need. Just as persons come to the church in need of God's grace, the faith community engages in ministry because it needs to live as Christ has commanded, as the body of Christ sent into the world to help God repair the brokenness caused by sin. By embracing its role as the fringe of Christ's cloak, the church can expect to have a healing effect on all who reach out to Christian communities with the desire to be made whole. **Karen Marie Yust**

So, what are we, as members of Unity Christian Church, willing to do to show God's compassion? Wouldn't it be wonderful if next Sunday or soon, rather than having our traditional worship service, we went out to minister and show compassion to those who

are unable to worship with us. Will you be willing to join groups who will go out, have prayer, bible reading and communion with Verne, Lucille, Bill and Betty Dell, Louise, Cliff and Germaine, Miss Mazie, and Gail Harris? Then we could come back here and praise God and have communion together, witnessing to what we have experienced as we show God's compassion to others!

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