

“And Jesus Had Compassion For Them”

I. Our Jesus is passionate and compassionate: He didn't only have strong feelings himself, but he also felt intensely for and with others. I believe that Jesus was particularly compassionate for those who were alone, frightened, or suffering. And because Jesus is who he is, his compassion has not been limited by time. Jesus felt compassion for the five thousand who came to hear him preach and had no food to eat for dinner; Jesus felt compassion last Sunday morning when a gunman opened fire at the nearby Unitarian Church; and Jesus feels compassion for the countless number of families and individuals in Knox County who are hungry and turn to FISH for help. But not only does Jesus have compassion for those who suffer, he also wants us, his followers, to share that compassion with him. There is a powerful example of this in today's Gospel. Jesus looked with compassion at the large crowd in front of him, rejected his disciples' urging to send them away, and in fact, told his disciples “You give them something to eat.”

II. This story of the feeding of the 5,000 has a prominent place in Scripture. Other than the Passion Story, it is the only event in Jesus' life reported in all four gospels. It must have been very important to the early church that this story would be told. It gives us an important insight into the Jesus' nature. It demonstrates that Jesus valued his followers' physical well-being as well as their souls.

Jesus' empathic response to the crowd is noteworthy because he had just learned that John the Baptist had been beheaded by Herod. Not only was Jesus feeling deep grief, but he also knew that he himself might be in real danger. Consequently, he withdrew to a deserted place to be alone and most likely to pray. But his privacy was shattered by the thousands of people who came from the surrounding towns. How did Jesus react? He had compassion – deep love, for the people, and it was out of this compassion that Jesus told his disciples to feed them.

So far, there is no big surprise here. We're accustomed to hearing about Jesus' love. But what about the disciples? There were 10,000 – 20,000 people (counting women and children) on those hills. The disciples had only two fish and five loaves of bread. Imagine how they protested: “This is a highly impractical; the treasury doesn't have nearly enough money to buy food for all these people; Jesus, send them away, please.” Jesus responded by telling his disciples to bring the food to him. He blessed it, broke the loaves of bread, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. Imagine how silly the disciples must have felt, beginning to feed thousands of people with this tiny bit of food.

II. We are told that Jesus performed a miracle. Not only did this food fill everyone, but there was a huge amount left over. It is easy to focus on the Jesus' miracle, but I'd like to direct our attention instead to the experience of the disciples. As I see it, this experience taught the reluctant disciples a significant lesson about how Ministry is based on Risk-taking, and about how risk-taking can lead to a glimpse of God's Abundance. Ministry, risk-taking, and abundance.

A. First, ministry. Notice that Jesus did not distribute the food himself. He blessed the food, but he ministered to the crowd through the disciples. It was from their hands that the people received the food. Jesus was teaching the disciples how to minister to others, and they became his hands and feet. It is my strong conviction that all Christians are ministers of the church – both lay and ordained persons. True, the ordained have a wonderful opportunity to concentrate their efforts of Christian service. But in fact, the role of bishops, priests, and deacons is largely meant to facilitate the ministries of the entire community – of all of you. In so much of what he did, Christ himself was preparing his disciples for the ministries he was asking them to undertake.

This is how it has worked throughout the last 2000 years. God calls us, and then God equips us through Scripture and the community of believers with what we need to succeed. If each of us was to write a spiritual autobiography, we could plot out God's calls to us into ministry and our responses. I think we would find that sometimes we accepted the call, at other times we delayed, and on occasion we have said "no" to God. If we were forthright, many of us would say that on the face of it, sometimes God's calls to us have seemed outlandish. I imagine that finding it difficult to do what God calls us to do is part of the universal Christian experience. Even those Christians who seem to be the strongest, the heroes and heroines of our faith, have described ambivalence and doubt -- doubt about their own capabilities and doubt about whether or not God will be there when they step out in faith.

B. That is why becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ always involves an element of risk-taking. At times we are called to follow Christ in ways that don't make sense to us. At such times, we need to act out of our faith, not out of our logic or our feelings. Through faith we rely upon the truth that God only calls us into those activities that are good for us and that God's wisdom is so much more comprehensive than our own. In taking the five loaves and two fish to feed the 5,000, Jesus' disciplines were required to step out in faith – to take a risk. Scripture does not tell us how this miracle occurred. It appears the disciples were required to take a major leap of faith as they began to share the food with the crowd.

As many of us have learned, taking such risks as disciples of Christ is often difficult. Teresa of Avila, a medieval mystic, in her book about the spiritual life entitled *The Interior Castle* wrote that Christians need to take increasing risks in order to grow spiritually. The greater the risks that one takes, the more of our fears and insecurities we encounter. This is not easy and is why so many of us tend to turn away from risk-taking to stay in more shallow, familiar spiritual territory. But in doing so, we miss the opportunity to see how God can help us overcome our fears and take us into a deeper faith.

- C. When we rely upon God in the midst of our fears and limitations we experience God's grace and abundance. It is in our need that God's abundance is often most clear. In other words, when we are willing to step out in faith, we enter into a partnership with God and share in God's abundance. This I believe is what the disciples experienced in the feeding of the 5,000. God provided the food that was needed when they would have no way of doing so themselves. Through our needs, God's abundance breaks through.

Mother Teresa told a story about when she and her order of nuns were ministering to the impoverished people on the streets of Calcutta, India. One morning, one of the sisters went to Mother Teresa and said, "There is no food. We will have to tell the people that we will not be able to give them anything today or tomorrow." At that time, they were feeding 7,000 people a day and had never failed to provide a meal before. But what were they to do? God will provide, Mother Teresa responded. At nine that morning, the government, for some unknown reason, closed all the schools for the day and sent the bread that they would have fed to the school children to Mother Teresa. No one went hungry. Jim Wright could tell us similar stories about how God has provided food to FISH Pantries. God does work in mysterious ways.

IV. Conclusion:

This morning we have come together as we do each Sunday to worship God, to be nourished in the Eucharist, and to be instructed by God's Holy Spirit. This particular Sunday I believe that we're being reminded that we are partners with Jesus Christ, the incredibly compassionate and loving Son of God. And in that partnership we can learn to love one another very deeply, to take risks as disciples to show that love, and count on God's abundance to give us the understanding, the empathy, and the resources we need. Thanks be to God. *Amen.*