

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Samantha Evans
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A Compassionate God

I would like to begin with a story about a woman who one day was walking along a busy path and suddenly fell into a large hole. She stumbled down into this hole and it was too deep, too steep, too slippery for her to climb her way back out.

And because it was a busy path, there were many people who saw her fall and rushed over to try to help her out. They tried throwing a rope down and some put out their hands to try to pull her out. But nothing seemed to work, so eventually they gave up and continued on their way.

And as the day went on, there were a number of people who stopped to try to help. Some said, try this or do that! Some even laughed at her because she was unable to do what they were telling her she should be able to do.

This continued until the woman herself just gave up. She stopped calling out to passersby and just sat down, with her head in her hands, resigned to her new reality. That is, until she heard a large thump and looked up to see that another woman had fallen down into the pit.

Now she was really upset. She exclaimed, "Oh great, now there's two of us stuck in this dreadful pit!" To which the newcomer said, "Oh honey, we're not stuck. I came down here on purpose. I was once stuck in this pit too, but I found my way out, and now that I know how to get out, I am here to help you so that together, we shall get out of this pit."

I'm sure many of you have heard some version of this story. It is meant to describe what compassion and solidarity looks like. The people who saw this woman fall into the pit and tried to help had sympathy for her. And those who passed by but couldn't help her were probably moved to pity.

But only the one who had been there, who actually knew what it felt like to be stuck in this pit, only the one who had been in it and somehow found their way out of it, only the one who had true compassion for this woman and her situation could help her get out of the pit that trapped her.

This definition of compassion is often lost on us. We liken it to sympathy or pity. But that is not what this word means. The German word for it is much more helpful,

which is usually the case...the German vocabulary is very straightforward and descriptive...*Mitleid* is the German word for compassion. *Mit* is with, *leid* is suffering. *Mitleid* literally means “with suffering.” So to have compassion for someone is to suffer with them.¹

In our gospel story today we read about Jesus’ encounter with a crowd for whom he has compassion. Not pity, sympathy or condescension. But true compassion. He suffers with them.

And to understand why this is so real and raw, why Jesus is suffering, you have to look back to the beginning of this text, where it says, the disciples had just gotten back to him and had told him what they had done and taught.

Which I am sure was full of life and love and healing and successful teaching. But it was also full of immense suffering and grief.

The most recent thing the disciples had done was retrieve the body of John the Baptist after Herod beheaded him. Jesus and John knew each other when they were in their mothers’ wombs. They likely grew up together. Ate together and played together and learned together. This man baptized him and loved him. He preceded him, but prophesied about him. He was the herald, who made the way for Jesus to be Jesus. And now, he was gone.

When Jesus arrived in this deserted place, he himself was grieving. He was suffering. He didn’t just have pity on this crowd, he had *Mitleid*. Compassion. Solidarity. He felt what they were feeling. And he longed for what they were longing.

It really is shocking to me, too, that this kind of crowd would even gather in the first place. So soon after John’s beheading. You’d think that it would make people withdraw, at least for a little while, until it felt a little safer.

But the promise of healing, the vision of the kingdom of God, the good news that John and Jesus and the disciples had been proclaiming outweighed the terror and the violence of the king. It was no match for the desire and the hope of the people to dwell in the presence of God and know the healing and the sustenance God promises.

And I can just imagine the overwhelming feeling Jesus must have had to be greeted by this crowd. How he must have been buoyed by their faith and their hope. He had

¹ Douglass John Hall, “Theological Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word, Year B*

compassion, because he too was hurting. He too was grieving. Maybe even feeling a little lost, a little tired.

And then, all of a sudden, thousands of people show up in a deserted place to be healed by him, to learn from him, to dwell with him and with one another. Suddenly, they were together. Completely and wholly together. And even though he was grieving, even though he was probably exhausted, he taught them and healed them and the lectionary skips this part, but he also fed them.

5,000 of them with just a few loaves and fishes that they managed to scrape together.

The deeply profound comfort in this text is what Jesus reveals to us about our God. He reveals that our God has compassion, Mitleid, for us. God suffers with us. And even when God is tired or worn down, God still shows up for us. To teach us. To heal us. To feed us. God's compassion for us is never-ending. Never exhausted. Never threatened or defeated. God is with us and God is for us. Period.

At Bible study this past week, one person noted how much comfort they felt from this. That even when tired and grieving, Jesus showed up and healed and taught and fed those in need.

But another participant shared that this didn't give them comfort so much as it made them feel tired. They felt exhausted for Jesus, who just kept going and going and going. He set out to this deserted place only to be met by thousands of people. And after all the healing and teaching and feeding, he went to the next place to teach and heal and feed there too. And we know that all of this takes enormous power and energy.

And we speculated that perhaps because he is fully God, he has some unlimited amount of power.

The interesting part is that lectionary leaves out a pretty large chunk of the narrative between their arrival at this deserted place and their arrival at the land of Gennesaret.

You see, during that time, after the feeding, Jesus sent his disciples back out on the water, while he himself went up to a mountain to pray. Before moving on to the next series of crowds, Jesus himself took time to stop. To rest and to recharge. To re-center and reconnect.

Maybe he does have unlimited energy, we can't know what God is, we can only know who is and what God is about. And what we see in this narrative is that Jesus, fully divine and fully human, took time to be still. He took time for himself. To be with his God. To tend to his grief and to his own self before going back out to tend to more of his sheep.

And my friends, this is a word comfort, but I suspect that for many of you, it might land more like a challenge. Because I know y'all don't want to hear it, but I'm gonna say it anyway.

Sit down! Stop! Be still! Tend to yourself, your health and your spirit.

Jesus calls us, heals us, teaches us, and sends us out to follow him and his way. This includes serving and tending to the needs of others, having compassion and seeking solidarity with those in need. He shows us how to get down in the pits that we have known and defeated, so that we might walk hand in hand to safety with those who are trapped there now.

And he also models for us the importance of tending to our own grief, our own suffering, even as we tend to the grief and suffering of others. Sometimes we have to take the time and make the space to be still and to listen.

Because here's the thing, it's not just about recharging. It's about reconnecting. When we just go, go, go, we forget what is driving our solidarity in the first place. We lose touch with our suffering, our grief or needs. We become untethered to who we are, to whom we belong, and to what we've been called to do.

Jesus didn't just go up that mountain to sleep (though I now understand why he liked to sleep on boats)...

He went up to the mountain so that he could be still. Because it in stillness that we encounter God. When the hustle and the bustle and the hardship of life on earth falls away, if even for just a moment, that is when we become able to hear the still, small voice of God. The one that whispers that we are God's beloved. That God is with us. God is for us. God will never tire of us or abandon us.

Our God is a Compassionate God. One who suffers with us. But also one who nourishes us with the Breath of Life, who smothers us with the Love of a Mother, who tends to us and to our needs, and guides us in the ways of truth and justice and joy. A Compassionate God who rests and who desires to rest with us.

Let it be so for us, especially on this Sabbath day. In the name of our Triune God, who creates, sustains, and redeems us all. Amen.