**Matthew 14:13-21** August 20, 2017

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**Someone Who Cares**

*Matthew 14:13When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. 14When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. 15As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.” 16Jesus replied, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.” 17“We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered. 18“Bring them here to me,” he said. 19And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. 20They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. 21The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**I. Who Has the Heart to Care**

She had worked a shift in customer service (you know, several nice people, but also a lot of complaints and a few calls you just have to hold way out here). On the way home from work she bought the groceries, then she made a home-cooked meal (none of this “throw it in the microwave” stuff), then cleaned half the house. It had been a grueling day. And when the kids started fighting, that was it. Everyone ended up in their own rooms, including mom. Then her husband came home. Words were fewer that evening and he understood. Then a neighbor came over with a tearful story of a lost dog. It wasn’t that she didn’t care. But at that point she just couldn’t get herself to. So her neighbor scowled at what looked like her indifference to the dog. She could feel a chill in the air. It wasn’t that she didn’t care, she was just exhausted.

Jesus was at about that point. It is just about the only time in Jesus’ ministry we see him like this. Consider that from a man, but more than a man, who while dying on a cross took notice of a thief crucified with him and comforted his soul; and who saw his own mother before his cross and even then made arrangements for her care after his impending death. About this supremely caring man Matthew 14:13 tells us, ***“When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.”***

What could make Jesus do that? Is Jesus not the one who invites us, *“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened”* (Mt 11:29)? Was this not the Jesus who drew crowds like a magnet, and loved it? What could make Jesus need to be alone, or at least with only his closest friends who would have enough sense to let him be, to let him pray. What news made Jesus withdraw to a solitary place?

What Jesus had heard was the death of his cousin, John the Baptist. They were cousins through their mothers. John had been the preparer of Jesus’ way. John had baptized Jesus. John was the first one to point the world to Jesus saying, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” This relative, this co-worker, this good and godly man who had done so much for Jesus’ did not just die, he was murdered. You can read the tawdry tale in this same chapter of the Bible if you want. John had been murdered at the hands of a shameless young woman, her wildly resentful mother, and the mother’s husband who had murdered hundreds of others, including his own children, just to keep his throne. The manner of John’s death was every bit as gruesome as you would expect from these three. When Jesus heard how this good and godly relative was murdered, he stepped into a small boat, sat down, steadied himself on the gunwale, and told his disciples to sail for the most remote corner of the Sea of Galilee that they could find. He needed peace.

Yet it was just like Jesus said, *“Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head”* (Mt 8:20). Have you ever seen a robin’s nest in a tree? Jesus did not have ever that much shelter. ***“The crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed [he] saw a large crowd.”***

Me? You? We might have yelled at the crowds, tried to make ourselves as unlikeable as possible, just to get away from them. Or maybe we would get back in the boat and tell our friends, “Sail out to the middle of the lake. Throw out the anchor and park it.” Or maybe we would help—and all the while begrudging every bit, thinking about how ungrateful these rotten people are. And even if we didn’t do any of those things, we would have had to fight off the temptations.

That’s not what Jesus did. His back is strong enough not only for the sins of the world, but also the worries and sorrows of the world.

***“When Jesus… saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them.”*** I don’t know about you, but to me, this is more meaningful than the miracle itself. ***“He had compassion on them.”*** Look at his care for people making unreasonable demands, for people who cared far more about themselves than him, for people who came mostly for the wrong reasons. ***“He had compassion on them.”***

In sermons, I don’t usually go much into the Greek and Hebrew. That’s pastor talk, like a doctor giving Latin for body parts, diseases, or medicine. But here I think it is worth it to wade up to our ankles in the Greek. The Greek word that describes what Jesus felt is a fun word,  “splanknidzomai”. It’s not a rare word, but it is used in very specific circumstances. It is used about a dozen times, but only in the Gospels, and only about Jesus, or a couple times he used it for fictitious characters in his parables. But in the Bible it is not used about any other person.

When Jesus, at another time, was journeying and two blind men were calling out to him and the crowd started shouting at them to shut up, Jesus he felt compassion on them.

When a man with a boy possessed by a demon that would throw him on the ground or into a fire, when that man pleaded for Jesus’ help, Jesus 

When the prodigal son’s father saw his long lost son coming home, he 

When Jesus happened upon a funeral where he saw a crying widow following a coffin on its way to the cemetery, the coffin of her only child, Jesus 

And when Jesus, emotionally drained and distraught, seeking out solitude after a huge personal tragedy saw a crowd before him, over them Jesus 

He did not begrudge them anything. No reluctance. No “Rats, I was hoping for a little down time.” He felt for them. His heart went out to them. And he spent this day that should have been a day, or even just a few hours of personal healing, he spent the day on them.

Is this not a comfort? Have you ever gone to a friend, hoping for support and sympathy, only to find them overwhelmed with their own problems, and you realize you just can’t put any more on them? Not Jesus.

The Bible often tells us that Jesus is compassionate, but watching it happen here on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, we feel it, we know it is true. His compassionate heart is open to us at all times, no matter how many others are also laying their own troubles on his heart. He has compassion.

His compassion inspires our compassion.

It is often noted that we people reflect what is done to us. We see that in demonstrations where hate generates more hate. We know that people who grow up around dysfunction, whether it is physical abuse or substance abuse or manipulative relationships or other things, when we are exposed to that, especially in our formative years, it becomes encoded in our behaviors.

But this also happens on the positive side. Good and inspiring and kind people in our lives encourage the same in us. This is one more reason to keep Jesus ever before our eyes. When we watch him go to the cross for us, willing to die for us, we are inspired to live and even die for others. When we see Jesus forgive us, we learn to forgive. And when we watch Jesus in our reading with his deep compassion for people, we too begin to reflect that compassion. May God grant that to you!

**II. The Power to Help**

When Jesus’ disciples looked at Jesus’ compassion, they must have marveled. But Jesus wanted his disciples to also marvel at something else. So he carefully uses up the hours of the day. He heals a child, a grandparent. He spends hours teaching them about the kingdom of heaven.

As time passes, to the disciples it looks like Jesus has forgotten about the time. The sun is getting low. There are crowds. They have no food. Thousands of hungry people cannot help but work mischief. Finally the disciples come to Jesus and say, ***“This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.”*** Many writers and preachers comment on what they see as unbelief in the disciples. “Look at these disciples who have no faith in Jesus!” But I don’t think it has much or anything to do with their unbelief. In fact, I believe that they are doing a right thing. They have a plan – “Why wait for the disaster? Be proactive. Dismiss the crowds.” They have looked at the situation and do not presume to demand a miracle, any more than I can demand that God miraculously heals my child and therefore I won’t take him to the doctor. My opinion is that it would have been irresponsible for the disciples to say nothing. I believe that what is happening, is that while they are making the calculations in their heads, Jesus is opening their eyes to the seriousness of the situation!

In every detail, we see not unbelief, but compliance on the part of the disciples. Jesus tells them to feed the people, and they do the math and realize it is impossible. Then he tells them to search the cupboards and find all available resources. As Jesus already knew, they find only enough food for one person to eat, or two if each is willing to walk away half hungry. And then Jesus tells them to have the people sit down. If I am a disciple I am getting a little nervous. “Ok, Jesus. But you are creating some pretty high expectations in these hungry people.” And then, with all the people looking on, aware of the sinking sun, the hunger, Jesus stands so everyone in the place can see him with nothing up his sleeves, and Jesus… Jesus prays.

“Of course he prays. This is Jesus!” But if there is anyone who doesn’t need to pray, it is Jesus, right? There is an ancient Jewish saying that goes, “He who enjoys anything without thanksgiving, is like one who has robbed God.” (Trench 209). Which is not to say that it is a sin if you don’t pray before your candy bar at break time. But a Christian must never imagine that anything good we have or achieve could happen without God’s blessing.

And so Jesus prayed, standing at the center of those thousands, eyes looking to heaven, perhaps with the very words the head of every Jewish home prayed before their meals, “Blessed art Thou, Jehovah our God, King of the world, Who causes to come forth bread from the earth.” (Edersheim, 469) Then he distributed the food. The disciples handed it out. The people ate and they ate until they were completely full and couldn’t eat another bite. And the disciples went out to pick up a dozen big baskets of leftover pieces—which is amazing because until the last couple decades of world history, everyone in the world has basically lived hungry. Only in the modern world do we have left-overs. But so it was when Jesus fed those thousands from one plate of food.

And the reaction? The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us nothing of how the crowds reacted. It seems that in the Gospel of Matthew the Holy Spirit puts this amazing story in front of us and tells us, “It doesn’t matter what the people around Jesus thought of Jesus. This is for you to chew on.”

God forgive us, in the name of Jesus, for times that we have doubted God’s willingness to help. May God look on us flawed, needy, sinful people as tenderly and forgivingly and compassionately as Jesus looked on that crowd. And may God, through his word, give us eyes that remember what Christ has done for us, and speak of this to others. Amen.