

The Compassionate Christ

Genesis 32:22-31

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 14:13-21

August 3, 2014 Pentecost 8 A

Last week, we heard about Jesus using parables to describe God's reign, as being something small that makes something great happen—like a mustard seed growing; like yeast leavening bread; like a hidden pearl coming to sight to make a person rich. Today's story is like a lived-out parable of God's reign—it's the story of something small—a few loaves of bread and a few fish—filling and feeding a huge crowd. It's not a parable that Jesus said, instead it's a parable of what Jesus did.

The earlier part of Matthew 14, just before today's passage, tells us of two different parties. The first party is held in a palace—Herod's palace (not the Herod who was king when Jesus was born, but a member of the same family). At this first party, we can assume that there was the best of everything, and plenty of it. Herod's feast was lavish and extravagant—the finest food that money can buy, the richest wines flowed freely. Yet that party was marked by misuse of power, abuse, and violence. John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, had openly preached against the immorality, the flaunting of the law, that had taken place there. This preaching had embarrassed the royal family, so Salome did her dance, and Herod made a promise to give her whatever he wished for. So what did he wish for? John the Baptist's head on a platter. Herod's self-indulgence led to the murder of a prophet, John the Baptist. So the big party with all the best food and wine and all the beautiful people ended up in terrible injustice; blood; death.

That was the first party. The story of the second, you heard earlier today, where Jesus fed the crowd. Jesus

grieved over the death of his friend and cousin. He knew that John's death foreshadowed what would happen to him if he stayed true to his mission in a brutal world, driven by hate, pride, and fear. Jesus wanted to be alone, or at least alone with his closest friends, so they went out on one of the fishing boats onto the Sea of Galilee to find a place of retreat. But the crowds needed Jesus. They followed along the shore, watching to see where the boat would land. Then, as the boat came back to shore, the crowds gathered around Jesus. They begged him to help them; to heal them. And Jesus was compassionate—he felt for the crowd. In John's telling of the story, he felt for them as he would feel for sheep without a shepherd. They were lost, confused, vulnerable, needy. So he healed some of them. But they wouldn't go away. When evening came, this tired, loving, compassionate man who had put his own needs, his own grief, aside for the sake of everyone else was faced with a new challenge. Since they had followed him, he felt responsible for them.

When Jesus landed, the story tells us, he felt compassion for the crowds and healed those who were sick. Dr. Delmer Chilton helps us understand how this applies to us when he says, "Jesus' ministry of healing was a profoundly important part of his mission. Jesus was not, in the words of an old Johnny Cash song, "so heavenly minded that he was no earthly good." Jesus changed people's lives in the here and now as well as in the sweet by-and-by. For us to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, to take up our cross with his, we must embrace our own call to cure and heal the lives of others. It is a call for us to go beyond the anointing with oil and laying on of hands to a ministry of getting involved in the nitty-gritty of people's day to day needs and problems. We

are called to join Jesus in having compassion and in channeling that compassion into positive action on behalf of others.”ⁱ (unquote)

“Should we send them away, so they can get home to their own suppers?” the disciples asked. Jesus told the disciples, “They don’t need to go. Give them something to eat.” What? They weren’t ready for that! “But we only have five loaves of bread and two fish! What good is that?” So Jesus took what little the disciples had, and gathered the crowds and had them sit down around him, there on the grass.

Then our Savior lifted the bread and fish, and looked up to heaven, and blessed it, and broke it, just as later he would bless and break the bread, bless and pour the wine, in the upper room on the night before he died. Jesus distributed the food, such as it was, and everybody got to eat their fill, and the disciples gathered up leftovers. Jesus’ meal was simple, marked by compassion and healing. Christ’s compassion leads us to satisfying the needs of the sick and the hungry.

One of my favorite professors in college, John Sperry, had a favorite way of beginning a test question: “Compare and contrast....” Compare and contrast those two meals; the one in the palace, the other on a hillside. The one with the best food and wine, the other with a simple poor person’s menu of fish and bread. The one marked by compassion, the other by a distorted hatred and passion that led to violence. The one showed the true nature of God, the other showed the true nature of sin. The difference between these two meals depicts fairly well the situation of our world today. A small part of the world has the best of everything. The rest of the world has, at best, very meager rations.

It's amazing, isn't it, how God provides for our needs when we need something the most? This story teaches us about the compassion of Christ. As Christians, we believe that what we see in Jesus Christ points us to God's true nature, so that we also learn about the compassion of God.

Looking back at the story of the loaves and fish reminds me that Jesus didn't just wave a magic wand and make the food appear in a puff of smoke, or had it lowered in a palette from a UFO, just to impress everyone. No, he invited the disciples to share what they had. And when they shared, it was enough. How many times have you heard that there is enough food in the world today for everyone, so that no one has to die of starvation, yet every few seconds, someone does? The problem isn't in food supply, it's in distribution. Greed, politics, bureaucracy, and apathy all get in the way. When we give to Week of Compassion, when we give to Heifer Project, when we gather food for local food banks, we're in the place of those twelve disciples, sharing what they had, and being amazed that everybody had enough. I'm constantly impressed with the generosity and compassion of this church, through its giving, and through the many times that the church has helped somebody pay a bill or find a place for their family to sleep. You are a compassionate people, and you know that when Jesus asked the disciples to share their food, that he's asking you to share yours, as well.

Like the disciples, it's easy for us to look at the enormous problems around and within, and say, "We don't have enough. We don't have the resources. How can our little bit possibly make a difference?" Delmer Chilton, whom I quoted earlier, said it this way—and it

sounds like he knows us. "With the disciples, we say, "Send the crowds away . . . we don't have anything here but five loaves and two fish."

We can't do anything about it; we don't have anything here but some old folks and a few kids.

We can't do anything about it; we don't have anything here but enough money to pay the bills.

We can't do anything about it; we don't have anything here but, but, but, but . . .

And Jesus says, "Bring them here to me." Bring me the five fish and two loaves. Bring me the old folks and kids, bring me your money, bring me what you've got.

And Jesus took the bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to the disciples to distribute. And it was enough for five thousand men, plus the women and the children. Indeed it was more than enough, there were basketfuls left over."ⁱⁱ (unquote)

In a few moments, we will come to the communion table. Bread and wine will be blessed, broken, and poured. You will pass plates and trays, and you will partake, because Jesus Christ has invited you to. This symbolic act of sharing will unite us together in Christ's spirit. But it doesn't stop there. You will find other ways to share; other ways to make things happen; other ways to feed the lonely crowd that extends around the world; because you are the compassionate followers of the compassionate Christ. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

ⁱ Rev. Dr. Delmer Chilton, Year A, Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, lectionarylab.com.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.