

## “God’s compassionate community”

July 31, 2011

Text: *Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21, Matthew 14:13-21*

### I.

When we’re at our best in the Christian Church, when we’re acting in the most faithful ways as disciples of Christ, our lives are marked by *compassion*. Compassion IS the essential value in our Christian faith. It is THE WAY we are to respond to the world.

To have compassion is to feel *with* the other person; it is to feel *with* them and to share the burden of whatever they are going through. When we have compassion for someone, we enter into their world; we feel their pain and heartbreak. In prayer, at its best, we are drawn into the world of the people for whom we pray.

In Jesus’ gospel teachings, we’re urged *to be compassionate as God is compassionate*.

In his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Marcus Borg notes this very teaching:

*According to Jesus, he ways, compassion is the central quality of a life faithful to God, the compassionate one.*

In the reading I just shared from **Matthew 14**, in the *Feeding of the Five Thousand*, Jesus has withdrawn in a boat from the crowds. It turns out that he has just heard about the death of John the Baptist and is hoping for a time of solitude and reflection. However, the people somehow learn where he is going and are able to follow him.

And as Matthew recounts it, when he goes ashore, he sees a great crowd; *and he has compassion for them and cures their sick*.

From what we know of Jesus’ life, this response of compassion was totally typical. It was simply who he was. Again and again, his most immediate response to any human situation of need was compassion.

For Jesus, says Marcus Borg, *compassion was more than a quality of God and an individual virtue: it was a social paradigm, the core value for life in community.*

### II.

There was a young, hippie-like college student named George who, for whatever reasons, paid little attention to how he was dressed and was notably unkempt. However, one Sunday morning, as he walked past a beautiful church on the edge of the university campus, he decided to go in. The church was full and the sermon was about to begin.

Walking down the center aisle looking for a seat, there was no seat to be found. So George just kept walking down the aisle until he arrived at the front. Once there, he squatted down on the floor in front of the pulpit. The people were incredulous and didn't know what to do. It was a tense moment.

After this awkward impasse, suddenly, one of the church's elderly Deacons began to slowly make his way down the aisle to where George was sitting. There was enviable elegance to the well-dressed Deacon and even though he was walking with a cane, he had a confident, authoritative look to him.

As this was unfolding, you could have heard a pin drop in the large, packed sanctuary. What was the Deacon going to do or say to the seemingly irreverent young man who had interrupted their service?

Arriving at last to the front where George was sitting, the Deacon dropped his cane to the floor; and then with great difficulty, he lowered himself to sit on the floor next to George as a symbolic gesture of welcoming and acceptance.

Clearly, everyone was choked up with emotion as all of this took place. When the pastor finally got back on track, he said: *What I'm about to preach you may never remember. But what you have just witnessed, you will never forget.*

***The challenge of BEING God's compassionate community.***

### III.

Jesus' first response to any life-situation—with anybody—was compassion. And of course, easily, compassion transmutes into affirmation and love and into optimism and hope for one's possibilities.

In our biblical story, when Jesus looks to his disciples, he doesn't see what they *do not* have; he sees only what they *DO* have. Whatever provisions they have—in this case, **five loaves and two fish**—are enough. And that's the point—not just for them, but for us, too: in our response to any situation of human need, whatever we have, it's enough.

We are not under-equipped to serve in this life. We are not under-equipped to act.

In God's church, for sure, we're here to worship God and to deepen and stretch our faith. But we're also here for each other. We *are* **God's compassionate community**.

### IV.

Perhaps you're a person who is too hard on yourself. You may work too hard, be too severe and sacrificial in your life-style and be overcome with weariness, night after night,

as you tuck yourself into bed.

It hasn't been easy; and there's been a price to pay in not being as supportive as you might be with your spouse, and not being around enough for your children.

Truth be told, you're still trying to win the approval of a very harsh parent. All your life, you've craved parental affirmation. But it has never come. And you continue with the hard work and long hours in a life sadly lacking in any joy or celebration.

Then, one day in a church service, you hear these words from the Psalmist:

*The Lord upholds those who are falling down, and raises up all who are bowed down. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.*

You're reminded that you are loved, valued and appreciated. And for a few fleeting moments, you feel accepted. And you don't feel like your parent's flawed and imperfect child.

And as you sit there in church, you discover that there's a certain welcoming spirit in the congregation, and that it feels good to be there in the midst of others—some of whom, no doubt, like you, are working their way through and around the ups and downs of life's journey.

Or, you may be a person with lingering health issues ... and you've become tired and wearied by it all. It never ends, it seems: one health matter after another.

The painful arthritis; then the minor surgery; then the appearance of a skin cancer once again that has to be removed. And all the while, you can't seem to get your diet straightened away so you feel as good as you think you ought to feel.

Again, the words of the Psalmist sound out. You can tell from the words, the Psalmist has been there ... down in the dumps ... wearied by the journey ... wondering why this and why that?? And the words pour over you:

*The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord fulfills the desires of all who call on him; his compassion is over all he has made.*

## V.

Again, we are **God's compassionate community**.

The essence of God's response to us is compassion. This is who we are to be as Christians, as followers of Jesus. With this in mind, we should never underestimate the value of our compassionate response to any human being.

When we come to church, we don't just come for ourselves, although coming for ourselves is important. We also come for one another.

We come to BE **God's compassionate community**—to listen to each other and be in support of each other. You never know how much something you do or say might mean to someone.

- For the person who has had a tough week ... the person who is going through a time of discouragement about whatever, a time of darkness and self-doubt. We never know.
- We all have tough weeks now and then ... always, there are things happening in our lives for which we need support. We may not even know it or acknowledge it ourselves, but we need it.

It's in this sense that we need to be **God's compassionate community** for each other.

## VI.

One night in New York, on Broadway, the great **Mary Martin** was preparing to go on stage as she had hundreds of times before; it was Rodger and Hammersteins' ***South Pacific***. Just before she took the stage a note was handed to her. It was signed by Oscar Hammerstein who, at the time, was on his death bed.

The note was short: *Dear Mary, it said, a bell is not a bell until you ring it. A song is not a song until you sing it. And the love in your heart isn't love until you give it away.*

That night, Mary Martin reportedly performed like she never had before.

We've all got stuff in our heart and spirit, gifts of love and kindness ... gifts of listening and sweetness. In **God's compassionate community**, we share these gifts with one another.

We're a small church family; we're not a megachurch.

- We don't have a praise band ...
- we don't sing our hymns from an overhead screen ...
- we don't have a long menu of programs where—always—there is something for everybody.
- We don't have small groups that we rush you all into for weekly gatherings in your homes.

There is nothing inherently wrong with any of this, of course; it's just not us.

What we do have is a church family where there is a place for you, where you will have a sense that you belong, where we will know your name and where, if you give us a chance, we will learn to care about you and to stand with you and your family during whatever joys and challenges life sends your way.

Always, it is our goal to BE **God's compassionate community**. Indeed, that's the most important thing we do.

*For the Lord is gracious and merciful,  
Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
The Lord is good to all,  
And the Lord's compassion is to the ends of the earth.*

May that compassion continue to pour over us!

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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