

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, July 18, 2021**

**“Compassion for Them”
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**

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“As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (v. 34).

Our Gospel Lesson begins with the prospect of rest after a period of demanding ministry. Jesus had sent twelve followers on a mission of preaching and healing—commanding them to undertake this mission, this journey, with few of the resources needed. Here’s what happened, just a bit earlier in the same chapter: “He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. [...] So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them” (vv. 7-9, 12-13).

So that’s what’s just happened, as our Gospel Lesson today picks up: the apostles have returned, reporting all that transpired on this challenging journey—and Jesus offers them respite, rest from the demands of ministry. “The apostles gathered around Jesus,” Mark writes, “and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves” (vv. 30-32).

After this demanding and exciting missional journey, you can really imagine the apostles’ relief as they receive this offer of rest. “Phewph,” they may have said among themselves, “We were worried he was going to send us someplace else!” And yet, this longed-for rest never materializes. Mark writes, “Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them” (v. 33). The apostles really can’t catch a break: they return from their mission, set off on a boat toward a “deserted place,” and yet people from all around extrapolate their destination and muster on shore to await them. This is like an exhausted family doctor landing in Hawaii for a holiday, only to find that all her patients are waiting for her at the Honolulu airport!

If you were on that boat with Jesus, what would your reaction be? Think about that honestly... For many of us, if we were exhausted and had been promised rest in some secluded place...and we saw that beach full of people waiting for us, I think our first reaction might be something like, “Hard to port! Jesus, turn the boat around! Let’s get outta here!” They’ve just come back from the demands of preaching and healing, with minimal resources, and they’re ready for a long-awaited rest...and now this? Now a crowd of aimless, confused people, this beach full of so many needs... We can imagine the apostles’ weariness, and perhaps even their

understandable desire simply to get away. And yet listen to how Mark describes the response of Jesus: “As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (v. 34).

Jesus, Mark tells us, “saw a great crowd.” Jesus saw that crowd: he really saw them. I wonder whether the apostles saw the crowd for who they were, or did they perhaps see the crowd only as inconvenience? But Jesus sees them—really sees them. The God revealed in Christ looks upon the crowd—looks upon *us*, and sees us too, in our distress... That God looks upon creation, and sees suffering in this world, is clear in the Old Testament. Think of the first murder, when God confronts to Cain: “And the LORD said, ‘What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is *crying out to me* from the ground!’” (Genesis 4:10). Or think of the story of Moses at the burning bush: “Then the LORD said, ‘*I have observed* the misery of my people who are in Egypt; *I have heard* their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings’” (Exodus 3:7). That God looks and listens to creation in suffering is a great comfort: it’s a comfort that—when we struggle and otherwise feel alone—we can remember, with thanksgiving, that God, the Living God, sees us.

And the challenge for us is to become people who look instead of overlook. I wonder how often we see—*really see*—the needs around us... The truth is we develop a capacity to see selectively, to see others when it’s convenient and to see right past them when it’s not. You’ve perhaps heard of an experiment conducted in the 1970s at Princeton Theological Seminary, where seminarians were told to go to another building to speak on the story of the Good Samaritan—and, unbeknownst to the students, as part of the experiment they came across someone fallen and in distress on the street (really an actor, a participant in the experiment). Seminarians who’d been told they had plenty of time tended to stop and help, but those who’d been told they were already late and needed to hurry *to deliver their talk on the Good Samaritan* tended to run right past the stranger in distress. And there’s certainly no use looking down on those students: I think we’ve all found ways to see needs (or not) depending on our own plans. The challenge for us is to learn to see others.

“and,” Mark tells us, “he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (v. 34). When Jesus sees, he sees them in their need, in their confusion, in their misguidedness—like sheep who have no one to lead or care for them. And how does he respond to these “sheep without a shepherd”? Mark tells us that Jesus “had compassion for them.” In the original language of Mark’s Gospel, the wording here is strong and evocative: the verb here for “had compassion” (σπλαγχνίζομαι) means something like “to be moved to one’s innards,” “to be moved in one’s innermost being.” It’s a bit like another phrase we have now, when someone says, “I was shaken to my core.” One paraphrased translation maybe gets it right by rendering the verse like this: “At the sight of them, his heart broke” (MSG). Seeing the crowd, Jesus is deeply moved with compassion.

What comfort to realize that God in Christ not only looks upon creation—but looks upon creation with this deepest compassion. One theologian points out that here Christ does not show pity but compassion: “Pity is something you can manage from afar—at a once-remove! Not compassion. You do not have compassion, really,” this theologian writes, “unless you suffer with those to whom you refer. The precondition for compassion is unconditional solidarity with the ones for whom you feel it” (Hall). God in Christ is no dispassionate observer, who

looks upon suffering unmoved; God in Christ is a compassionate observer, who looks upon suffering and is moved to God's core. This verse reveals to us that the very heart of God is compassionate.

And the challenge for us is to allow ourselves likewise to be moved with compassion when we see those who are “like sheep without a shepherd.” When we see people confused and in need, we can at times be callous or quick to blame—and yet, in our Gospel Lesson, we see no such callousness or calculus of blame. God in Christ sees the crowd and enters deeply into compassion for them. The challenge for us, then, is this: could we learn to cultivate compassion, in ourselves and in this community of faith? Could we find new ways to look on others with compassion, to nourish and encourage the compassion we offer others? The nourishing of compassion can take many forms in our individual lives, in our families, in our relationships, in this congregation—but in all these contexts, the nourishing of compassion requires imagination. To nourish compassion, we must find ways not only to see the needs around us, but also to see these needs differently through Christ.

I'm reminded of an old story often story about New York City mayor Fiorello La Guardia. The story's told that, on “[o]ne bitterly cold night in January 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. La Guardia [reportedly] dismissed the judge for the evening and took the bench himself. [...] [An] old woman [in tatters] was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told La Guardia that her daughter's husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper [...] refused to drop the charges. [...] [La Guardia] turned to the woman and said 'I've got to punish you [...]—ten dollars or ten days in jail.' But even as he pronounced the sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. [...] 'Here is the ten-dollar fine which I now remit;’” he reportedly said, “and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat.’ [...] So the following day [...] newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to the bewildered [grandmother] who had stolen a loaf of bread [...], fifty cents of that amount being contributed by the red-faced grocery store owner” (McGlone).

Christ saw the crowd: may we be comforted by the knowledge that God in Christ looks upon us in our struggles, and may we be challenged to find new ways to see—really see—the struggles of others. And Christ had compassion for the crowd: may we be comforted by the knowledge that God in Christ has compassion for us in our struggles, and may we be challenged likewise to cultivate compassion.

Mark writes: “As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (v. 34). Amen.