

“Compassionate Eyes”

“When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.”

An early-morning telephone call in our family home usually meant one thing: The Post Office was calling my father to come in to work on his day off. The sound of the phone was a mixed message to my parents: the pay would be good, since he would receive overtime pay for the full shift; but it meant that any plans my parents had for the day would be thwarted. Sometimes, I could hear my parents discussing whether to answer the phone, especially at times when my father could really have used the rest. He had earned his day of rest, and even the prospect of a bonus in his paycheck was often not enough to give up his day of sabbath.

We often associate “sabbath” with a particular day of the week: Saturdays for the Jewish people, and Sundays for Christians (who celebrate the Resurrection of Christ on every “first day of the week”). But while the Sabbath Day is prescribed in the Torah (*“Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy ... the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God”* – Exodus 20:8-10) the commandment for God’s people to observe a day of rest is rooted both in the practical advice that all persons need a time of rest and refreshment and in the command to trust in the Lord to care for God’s people and all of creation. Observing sabbath is an act of faith in which we place our trust in God alone, rejecting the authority of all other gods who might seek our allegiance:

“The ancient wisdom of the Sabbath commandment – and of the Christian gospel as well – is that there is no saying yes to God without saying no to God’s rivals. No, I will not earn my way today. No, I will not make anyone else work either. No, I will not worry about my life, what I will eat or what I will drink, or about my body, what I will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? And there was evening and there was morning, the seventh day.” – Barbara Brown Taylor.

While Jesus’ rejected the interpretation of the Sabbath law that had turned it into a day of harsh regulations (*“The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath”* – Mark 2:27) he modeled the importance of sabbath rest in his life, taking time away from his ministry among God’s people periods of rest and refreshment. The beginning of today’s Gospel lesson is one of these times; Jesus *“withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself”* (Matthew 14:13). Jesus’ withdrawal comes in direct response to the announcement of the death of John the Baptist at the murderous hands of Herod Antipas (*“The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given; he sent and had John beheaded in prison.”* – 14:9-10). Grieved at the violent death of his cousin who had baptized him in the Jordan River while calling on the people to *“repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”* (3:2), Jesus withdraws to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, Gentile territory where Herod Antipas had no authority. Rather than responding with violence and revenge to the death of this innocent man, *“once again, the sovereign representative of the Kingdom of God, when faced with the hostile power of the kingdom of this world, does not respond with violence, but demonstrates the nature of his kingdom by withdrawing”* (M. Eugene Boring). Our Lord is undoubtedly in need of sabbath rest, time to mourn his cousin’s murder, a period for prayer and reflection before he resumes his ministry of proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven.

But even though he has withdrawn to the other side of the lake for his sabbath rest, his plans are interrupted *“when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns”* (14:13), traveling on foot from the western, Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee. When Jesus comes ashore after crossing the lake, the crowds are waiting for him. He would have had every right to send them away, or to ask them to respect his privacy in his hour of grief. He could have reminded them of the sabbath commandment and of his need to have a time for prayer and reflection. He could have told them to wait until he had completed his sabbath prayers, at which time he would rejoin them. But when Jesus sees the crowds waiting for him of the shores of the Sea of Galilee, his reaction is quite different; she shows no sign of being upset or disappointed that his sabbath plans have been thwarted. Instead, when Jesus *“saw a great crowd, he had compassion for them and cured their sick.”* (14:14). As Jesus *“peered out across the vast human sea of hunger and heartache that pressed in around him ... however fatigued, Jesus made himself available to the sick and suffering.”* (Curtis Mitch & Edward Sri). Jesus doesn’t see the crowd as a nuisance, an interruption to his well-deserved sabbath rest; he looks upon them with the compassionate eyes with which our Lord always looks upon God’s people, the people who God loves so much that *“he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.”* (John 3:16).

*“When Jesus loved a guilt-laden person and helped him, he saw in him an erring child of God. He saw in him a human being whom his Father loved and grieved over because he was going wrong. He saw him as God originally designed and meant him to be, and therefore he saw through the surface layer of grime and dirt to the real man underneath. Jesus did not *identify* the person with his sin, but rather saw in this sin something alien, something that really did not belong to him, something that merely chained and mastered him and from which he would free him and bring him back to his real self. Jesus was able to love men because he loved them right through the layer of mud.”* – Helmut Thielicke.

Jesus’ compassionate act of curing the sick who were among the crowds that had interrupted his sabbath rest must have gone on for some time, because soon it was evening and the disciples were becoming concerned about the crowds’ finding food for their evening meal: *“When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.’”* (14:15). The disciples are concerned for the crowds, who are depicted as hungry and destitute, unable to buy food; but being so enthralled by Jesus’ healing activity, they are reluctant to leave. The disciples’ request is not malicious; they are simply aware that they are in a deserted place where there is not food readily available, and that the approach of evening makes it imperative for some action to be taken. But Jesus’ response to them is both unexpected and startling: *“They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”* (14:16). Jesus is invited his disciples to look upon the crowds with the same compassionate eyes that will not send them away; he invites them into his compassionate response to those in need.

“The simple detail that Jesus did not send the people away is also remarkable. Instead of commanding them to leave, he orders them to stay and sit down on the grass. He then gets to work doing what he has come to do – curing every disease and sickness among the people. The multiplication of the loaves of bread and the fish harken to the precious parable that Jesus speaks to the crowd concerning the mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven produces a plentiful harvest from the smallest of seeds.” – Jennifer T. Kaalund.

The disciples at first are understandably perplexed by Jesus’ command that *“you give them something to eat,”* responding that *“we have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.”* (14:17). While this is obviously far too little to feed such a multitude, Jesus commands the crowds to sit down and, like the host of a Jewish feast, he pronounces the blessing, breaks the loaves, and gives them to the disciples to pass out to the

people, satisfying their hunger. The result is *“all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full”* (14:20). This miraculous feeding *“supersedes every law of physics known to us. The bread and the fish just keep on coming.”* (Mitch & Sri). The abundance of leftover fragments is a documentation of the greatness of the miracle. It is a counter picture of the Mosaic manna, which could not be preserved (*“Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as was needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.”* – Exodus 16:21); the feeding of the multitude *“portrays the messianic times, when hunger will be replaced by extravagance”* (Boring).

“On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.” – Isaiah 25:6-8.

The miracle is reminiscent of Elijah’s visit with the poor widow of Zarephath, whose food lasted through an extended famine (*“The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah”* – 1 Kings 17:16) and Elisha’s multiplication of twenty loaves for 100 men with leftovers (*“So he repeated, ‘Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the LORD, ‘They shall eat and have some left.’” He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the LORD.”* – 2 Kings 4:43-44). Jesus’ feeding of the multitude contains aspects that point forward to the institution of the Lord’s Supper, *“an anticipatory sign of the Eucharist to be distributed as communion to the multitudes of God’s people”* (Mitch & Sri). Matthew concludes his account of the feeding by reporting that *“those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children”* (14:21), a numbering system that has its basis in Jewish tradition (*“The Israelites journeyed from Ramses to Succoth, about six thousand men on foot, besides children.”* – Exodus 12:37).

The miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand is one of the few miracles stories that are reported in all four Gospels (Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-13). While each of these four accounts contains varying details (for example, a boy is the source of the loaves and fishes in John 6:9), like all miracles they serve to proclaim the coming Kingdom of God in which the hungry will be fed with good things (Luke 1:53) while at the same time meeting the immediate needs of those who are in Jesus’ presence. The miraculous feeding reminds us that God continues to provide all the necessities of life *“out of pure, fatherly goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!”* (Small Catechism). Jesus teaches us to pray *“give us this day our daily bread”* so that God’s people might ask *“in this prayer that God cause us to recognize what our daily bread is and to receive it with thanksgiving!”*

“The message of the miracle is clear: It is not the will of God that people should go hungry. The gospel is never offered as a substitute for the fundamental needs of human survival, for it is the will of God that those who hunger and thirst should be given food and drink and that they should be provided generously and without stint ... The spiritual and physical are each part of the divine concern and the divine plan. Jesus fed the hungry on the mountainside, but while he did not ignore or make light of their physical hunger, he did not stop when that had been satisfied; he went on to meet the hunger of their souls.” – Peter Gomes.

There is no doubt that Jesus was in need of sabbath rest when he went to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, but his compassion for the crowds who greeted him there took precedence over his personal need at the moment; he cares for the physical needs because compassion dictates that we do not turn our backs or walk away from someone at the hour of their need. His time of sabbath rest would come when, *“after*

he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray” (14:23); but Jesus’ compassion for his people would remain at the heart of his ministry, knowing that as he supplied food for their physical needs that he was the one who would also supply the “bread of life” that would satisfy the hunger that could only be fed by the one who is the Bread of Life:

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty ... And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.” – John 6:35, 39-40.

It is important for us to observe Sabbath in our lives, to heed our Lord’s command step away from the busyness of life in order to find rest and refreshment in God’s presence. But sabbath is not merely a “day off” for those who are called to serve all people in the name of Jesus; it is a time of rest so that we might get back to the mission that God has set before us, to continue to look upon all people through the same compassionate eyes that inspired Jesus to provide food to that hungry multitude as well as the bread of life that provides us with “strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.”

“All of us in the church need ‘grace-healed eyes’ to see the potential in others for the same grace that God has so lavishly bestowed on us. ‘To love a person,’ says Dostoevsky, ‘means to see him as God intended him to be.’” – Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*

Even though they would debate whether that early-morning phone call should be answered, my father would always get up and go to work even though it meant satisfying his day off. While he was well-compensated in his paycheck, he also knew that he was making a difference in delivering important letters and packages to his customers, who always appreciated his faithfulness to his job. While I never worked for the Postal Service, it was a lesson that has served me in my ministry, knowing that while it is important to take the sabbath command seriously for my own health as well as the vitality of my ministry, it is also important to realize that when we come upon someone in need that the compassionate with which our Lord looks upon us supersedes our own plans and desire. We are always called to look upon all persons with the same compassionate, grace-healed eyes that have claimed us as God’s beloved children, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the Cross of Christ forever.

Amen.