

Cultivating an Abundant Heart
Matthew 14: 13-21
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Recently in the news there was a report about a young man who risked his life to pull another man from a burning car. The segment included a reunion of the two to thank the rescuer for saving his life. Fortunately, both men escaped the harrowing experience with minor injuries, but watching the video, you know it was a split-second decision and dangerous attempt on the young man's part. As flames were shooting out from under the hood of the car and others screaming, begging him not try again because of the intense heat and the fear of an explosion. Others stood back and watched in horror while the young man lunged in several times trying to grab victim and pull him to safety.

We celebrate such events because they remind us of the selfless and heroic things that people can be moved to do for strangers. Whether it is jumping into a flooded river to rescue someone, rushing into a burning car or house, maybe fending off an attacker on the street or simply standing up to a verbally aggressive person demanding that they show respect for another person. We admire such spirit in the actions of others.

That secret drive, that inspiring motivation, that causes someone to spring into selfless action is the root emotion that Jesus expresses in this story of the feeding of the 5000. You can tell from the gospels that this is a central story that depicts that depth of Jesus' character to us. It is an inspirational story that is found in all four gospels and twice in Matthew.

In today's reading I am particularly struck by the phrase, "He had compassion for them." This Greek word for compassion, *spagchnizomai* (*splänkh-ne'-zo-mia*) appears 12 times in the New Testament. Almost all of them referring to Jesus' emotional

response to someone suffering including the five stories of feeding the multitudes. This word is also used to describe the emotion expressed in our two favorite parables the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. In the prodigal son it is when the father sees the son returning home, he jumps up with compassion and runs to him. In the Good Samaritan, it is the Samaritan man, the unlikely and unpopular hero of the story, that shows compassion and gives aid.

In today's reading we have a similar, not as expected response by Jesus. The opening line of the reading today says, "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself". What did Jesus hear that caused him to withdraw and want to be alone? Jesus had just received word that his cousin John the Baptist had been beheaded by Herod. Jesus was grieving. Jesus may have even felt personally threatened by the news, wondering if he could be now on Herod's list as a threat. I would imagine it would have shaken him to the core and Jesus needed some time to process this, grieve this and regain his bearings.

Jesus gets into a boat seeking a deserted place to be alone, but when he gets to the other side and sees the crowd, I would have understood if Jesus has said, "hey everyone I really just need to be alone right now. I received terrible news and I just need to tend to this for a bit. Come back tomorrow."

But something in that moment, Jesus seeing the crowd, he saw something else, he saw a people also hurting and he begins to heal the sick. Maybe he noticed that they too were impacted by the news of Herod murdering John the Baptist and they were needing to share that with Jesus, not for him to be alone. In Mark's version of this story it says, "Jesus had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." (Mark 6:34)

Isn't that the way this emotion comes up in us too? It is when we recognize a piece of us in the pain and hurt of another that we are moved with compassion. Being able to find our common ground is the first step in being moved by compassion and action. In

the parables, maybe the father saw a bit of his youthful self in his prodigal son. Maybe the Samaritan remembered a time that he was left bleeding on the side of the road, ignored by others because he was a Samaritan, one despised by others too. I believe that is why the golden rule says, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” We need to put ourselves in their shoes for a moment.

It is that emotion, *splagchnizomai* (*splänkh-ne'-zo-mia*), compassion – to share in the passion or pain of another, that God calls us to experience. Not just for our friends, our companions but for the strangers, even our enemies according to the Gospel.

It is that level of shared identity that Jesus is expressing that gets him out of his own need and caring for the shared need of others. After hours of him doing this, loving and healing others his disciples come to him and say, “Hey, Jesus it’s getting late send the people home. They are probably getting hungry.” Now that sounds good, caring and compassionate. An appropriate response we can all relate to, but Jesus calls them out, asking them to show the same level of compassion that he has been showing them all along. Up until this point we don’t even know the Disciples are even there. Jesus has been giving to the people and is probably exhausted even more. He wants to sit back and have the disciples share in the burden of caring for the people. So he sits down and says, “nah, you give do something for them, give them some food.”

Compassion is not just Jesus’ thing, compassion is a human thing and it is a God thing. It is companioning in the passion of others. It is finding our shared burden, and passion for the pain happening around us and responding with love.

Jesus thought he was alone in his grief, but then he realized that others were hurting too. They shared that grief together to find healing. The disciples thought they only had enough food for themselves but when they, like Jesus, shared what little they had, being blessing to others, it became a bountiful feast of love and compassion so that no one was left to fend for themselves. They were all in it together and they were all satisfied.

This past week I was in Glen Ellyn Illinois for a training on Conflict Mediation within the church taught by the Mennonite Peace Institute. Something I think most people would benefit from. It was an intense week, along with the added work of organizing the details for Ellen's funeral. Thank you for all who played a part in offering a wonderful service for Ellen.

At the training I heard some good reminders that we can all keep in mind. At the heart of this training is the clear, Christ-like expectation that we will do all things in love.

1. Valuing people and the relationship over the issue – Soft on people, hard on issues
2. Coming together around our common bond. Finding ourselves in the other.
3. Listening deeply to the other to understand
4. Identifying the need or the hurt for each other
5. Owning our own mistakes - confession
6. Seeking to restore the relationship when possible

All of these steps cultivate deeper compassion and deeper connections with one another.

So I leave you with these words from Colossians 3:12-15

Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body.