

Pentecost 9B (7/22/2018)

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalm 23

Ephesians 2:11-22

**Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**

*Compassion is not an individual act, but an orientation toward the world. Jesus is “a mirror of the Father’s heart,” embodying God’s own compassion, God’s costly solidarity with a world grasping for meaning and wholeness.*

There is something more to this story than the phenomenon of physical healing, as if Jesus’ healing of the sick were mundane in and of itself. Look closely at our Gospel from Mark today, and you’ll see more than an account of a supernatural event; **you’ll see a portrait of the living God, the one who loves and cares for the world as a shepherd for his flock.**

At the outset, this story might seem like excellent source material for a sermon about the importance of Sabbath. Returning to Jesus after the first round of their apostolic work, the disciples receive a gracious invitation: “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves,” he says, “and rest a while.” The narrator adds: “For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.” *You’ve been working hard*, the Teacher insists, *now it’s time to take a break, to regenerate, to refocus*. Of course, **the biblical narrative commends Sabbath-taking**; even the Creator rests on the seventh day, building Sabbath into the natural order of things, and affirming that the world will not stop turning if we take time away from our work. “And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.”

Yes, this would be a wonderful story about Sabbath... if it ended at verse 32. But throughout the rest of the Gospel, Jesus and the disciples are bombarded with human need: “many saw them going [away] and recognized them, and they hurried

there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.” And later, “When they got out of the boat [at Gennesaret], people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.” So, **Jesus and the disciples never get their Sabbath; the deserted place fills with people before they even arrive, and their time for personal renewal comes to an end before it ever begins.** “He had compassion for [the crowd], because they were like sheep without a shepherd,” Mark reports, so Jesus continues his work of teaching and healing – the work of God’s reign – unabated.

If this were a story about individual duties and accomplishments, then Jesus’ abandonment of Sabbath rest would set an unhealthy example. The moral of the story would be to always put others before yourself, and to rest only when every need has been met. And frankly, this is a common, albeit unsustainable, approach to relationships. Many of us feel an acute responsibility to uphold the interests of others, especially the most vulnerable people in our lives – our children or grandchildren, partners, parents, students, clients, or neighbors – even at the expense of our own physical, emotional, and mental health. This sense of responsibility can develop into a savior complex, conscious or unconscious, where we derive our value chiefly from our dedication to helping others. But **the well of human need is bottomless**, and for every individual effort on behalf of a person in need, there are countless needs that go unmet.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus understands the importance of Sabbath for sustaining the work of loving care, so why does he immediately resume his teaching and healing instead of insisting upon the rest that he had planned? I believe the answer lies in Mark’s

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<sup>1</sup> See Karen Marie Yust, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, 262.

reference to Jesus' compassion. Our ordinary use of this word has cheapened its value, equating it to something like pity. But compassion is much more than a feeling of detached concern. The power of this concept lies in its word structure: compassion, from the Latin roots *com*, "with," and *passio*, "suffering," quite literally means "suffering-with."<sup>2</sup> So, **Jesus' compassion is not simply a noble sentiment, but an actual bond with the masses who reach out to him; he experiences their need as his own. To quote theologian Douglas John Hall, Jesus' compassion for the crowd "is not condescension," but rather "the mark of his *identification* with his kind...."**<sup>3</sup> In other words, **compassion is his *modus operandi*, the essence of his relationship to the world God so loves.**

What's more, Jesus' compassion is not simply an accident of his personality. **If Jesus is "a mirror of the Father's heart," to borrow Martin Luther's phrase, then compassion is emblematic of the divine nature.** Renowned Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel puts it this way:

God does not reveal [Godself] in an abstract absoluteness, but in a personal and intimate relation to the world. [God] does not simply command and expect obedience; [God] is also moved and affected by what happens in the world.... *God is concerned about the world and shares its fate.*<sup>4</sup>

Jesus is God's word incarnate, the redeeming love of God in the flesh. And, **this love is not theoretical, but lived; the Christ joins himself completely to the suffering world and shares our troubled existence, even to the point of death.**

So, our Gospel story today is less about Jesus' individual acts of compassion (and the Sabbath rest that he might need over the course of his work) as it is about

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<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, 262. See also *The Cross in Our Context*, 22-3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 264.

<sup>4</sup> *The Prophets*, 223-4. As cited in Hall, *Feasting on the Word*, 262. Italics mine.

the way that Jesus discloses God's way of being in the world. **Jesus' movement toward the people who are desperate to reach him is God's own movement. So, his compassion can't wait. Since it's inherent in his identity and purpose, it's manifest in his ministry at every turn.**

What does this have to do with us? The truth is that we are more like the crowds grasping for Jesus than we are like Jesus himself. "Be compassionate," he commands his followers, "just as your Father is compassionate."<sup>5</sup> Yet, **before we can presume to imitate God's compassion, we yearn for it ourselves. We too are like sheep without a shepherd, and so we rush to meet the Teacher that he might show us the way; we reach out to the Healer that he might make us whole; we stand at a distance from the Crucified One that he might offer us grace. Only then can we practice true compassion ourselves, recognizing in others our own deepest needs and sharing their suffering. Only then can we perceive, in the words of Frederick Buechner, "that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you, too."**<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 6:36. See Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 46ff.

<sup>6</sup> <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources#resources>.