

“Compassion”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
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Scripture Reading: Mark 6:30-34

³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹He 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. ³²And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.



Sermon: “Compassion”

Jesus was a busy man. The gospel writers spend a lot of time writing about things Jesus did: the traveling, the teaching, the miracles. There’s not as much written there about his personal life, like what he liked to do in his free time. We could really have used something like a first century People Magazine to give us the inside scoop on Jesus’ favorite “cheat day” snacks and where he liked to spend his vacations. Maybe a Barbara Walters interview to really get at what Jesus’ home life was like growing up. Or an Instagram page where we could see candid shots of Jesus with his friends. But we don’t have any of that.

What we do have is a portrait of a man who worked hard and was always on the move. Mark’s gospel has a certain urgent, breathless quality to it. When Jesus calls the disciples, he calls them “Immediately.”¹ When the hemorrhaging woman touches him, he is “Immediately” aware of it.² “Immediately” he makes his disciples get into their boat and when he walks out to them on the water, he “Immediately” tells them “Do not be afraid.”³

But in the passage we read today, things seem to slow down a bit and we really see a more human side of Jesus. He is exhausted. So are the disciples. It’s time to take a break, if only for a little while. So, they get in their boat to cross the lake to escape the busy-ness of their lives. Maybe they’ll play a little touch football or take a nap. Just to not have to think about work for a while would be nice. But sure enough, just as they’re getting to where they’re going, they see that another crowd is waiting there on the shore to greet them.

You might know what that’s like. You’ve had a hard day. You’ve done what needed to be done at work. The kids are fed, the house is relatively clean. It’s time to put your feet up and rest a spell. But then something comes up. There’s an emergency no one knows how to fix but you. A major appliance in your house breaks. Your kid tells you he needs a dozen cupcakes for teacher appreciation day which is coming in approximately ... *today*.

We like to think of Jesus as having this supernatural control over his emotions. But here’s another way Mark’s gospel is interesting: he is careful to portray Jesus as truly human. In Mark’s gospel Jesus feels pity,⁴ love,⁵ anger⁶ hunger,⁷ and here, he seems tired and badly in need of rest. But Jesus felt something else here, too: compassion

When the crowd approaches, Jesus does something that I’m not sure many of us could have managed: He pauses his time away with the disciples to reach out to these people who are hungry to hear the word of God and most likely, to receive miracles of healing, and maybe even just to see a celebrity up close. And we know what happens next. This is the beginning of the more famous story of Jesus’ feeding the 5000. But before that happens, Mark tells us that Jesus first sacrifices his period of rest and relaxation to spend time with them, because he has *compassion* for them.

When we hear the word “compassion,” we tend to think “pity.” And one might fairly ask, what’s pity got to do with this? But within compassion, there is a healthy dose of empathy, or the ability to understand someone else’s situation. Frederick Buechner wrote that “Compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it’s like to live inside somebody else’s skin. It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you, too.”⁸ Which reminds me of Atticus Finch from *To Kill A Mockingbird* when he tells his daughter Scout: “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”⁹

In this moment when Jesus *needs* rest and Sabbath, he could have seen these 5000+ people waiting for him on the shore as an interruption, an inconvenience. But instead, Jesus puts himself in *their* shoes; tries to see this from *their* perspective.

And when he does, he can see their hunger, their need. He understands why they are there. And that's a product of compassion.

And this wasn't a departure from the way Jesus did things. Compassion was at the core of everything he did. He fed people not because they deserved it, but because they were hungry. He healed people not because they had earned it, but because they were sick. He forgave people not because they were so good, but in spite of the fact that they were so bad.

That's what compassion looks like. Compassion sees past the worldly labels and the political motivations and the conspiracy theories and the fears about what might happen and the prejudices about who "they" are, and steps into their shoes to try to understand their situation, how they feel, what they might be experiencing. Compassion drives you to see beyond the end of your own nose. To recognize that the world is bigger than just your experience of it.

And why are we talking about compassion today? Because of the election. When I originally wrote this sermon, a winner had not yet been declared in the presidential election. When we recorded it Friday to post online, I still didn't know who had won. Today we know, but the outcome of this election has not changed what I originally wrote.

This has been a long and divisive campaign season. And no matter how you feel about how it has turned out, we have got to find a way forward that is different than the way we've been doing things. Because I have a secret that I want to share with you: They, whoever "they" are, are not so very different from "us" whoever "we" are. "They" are not monsters. "They" have wants and needs and worries, too. "They" are just as capable of being thoughtful, kind, and considerate as "we" are. "They" are not mindless, evil minions looking to do "us" all harm. And "we" do the world a disservice when we behave otherwise.

But we do disagree about important things. And so, we have to keep working for what is right. We have to continue to advocate for the Kingdom of God. But, we have to find a way to do so that does not reduce those with whom we disagree to something "less than," as just an enemy to be defeated. And we have to be respectful.

We have been taught since we were "this" high, to never be a sore loser. Well, it's just as important to not be a sore winner, too. At the close of the American Civil War, when Robert E. Lee signed the instrument of surrender, he did so in a quiet, dignified manner. But afterwards, when Union soldiers began to celebrate by firing their guns, Ulysses S. Grant immediately ordered them to be quiet. He would not allow signs of celebration that would disrespect their conquered foes.¹⁰ As vicious as that war was, when it was over, the two generals handled both winning and losing with dignity.

And we should take a lesson from that. Snarky comments don't help. Sarcastic Facebook posts don't help. Gloating over your victories and complaining about your defeats doesn't help. Stuff like that might make *you* feel good, but no one hears you except those who already agree with you. And that's not a recipe for cooperation and moving towards the Kingdom together. We have to have compassion for one another. We have to be more civil in our interactions with those on the opposite side of our debates. And we need look no further than the example of Jesus Christ to see that in action.

Jesus taught and preached against the accumulation of wealth and for the sharing of wealth with the poor. But when a rich man asked him how to gain eternal life, Jesus didn't reply with a sarcastic answer, he didn't dismiss him. Mark tells us that Jesus "looking at him, loved him..."¹¹

And when a Centurion sent for Jesus to help his dying servant, Jesus could very easily have seen the Centurion for what he was, an instrument of Roman oppression. As a military commander, the Centurion was an occupier of Jesus' homeland. Jesus had every reason to despise him. Yet Jesus came to him and healed his servant.¹²

And let's not forget tax collectors, like Levi¹³ and Zacchaeus.¹⁴ Tax Collectors were considered the most corrupt of officials because they were notorious cheaters who took advantage of the poor and vulnerable. In addition to collecting taxes, they also kept copious sums of money for themselves. Jesus had every reason to be angry and to respond to them in righteous indignation. But instead, Jesus welcomed them and encouraged them to repent and follow him.

Jesus modeled compassion in his interactions with everyone, even the people who mocked and jeered him as he hung dying on the cross: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they are doing."¹⁵

There will always be bad people in the world. Evil people always have a way of getting where they want to be. But the good people of this world far outnumber the bad. Yes, we still must work for what is right; we still must struggle to overcome evil and injustice in this world as we work towards God's Kingdom. But we have to find a way to do so that is

civil and respectful to one another. If we are to be a part of what God is doing in this world, we're going to have to work together, with all kinds of people. We're going to have to learn to listen to each other. We're going to have to learn to give a little sometimes. We're going to have to learn to understand one another.

And that all starts with compassion.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Mark 1:20, NRSV

² Mark 5:30, NRSV

³ Mark 6:45-50, NRSV

⁴ Mark 1:41, NRSV

⁵ Mark 10:21, NRSV

⁶ Mark 3:5, NRSV

⁷ Mark 11:12, NRSV

⁸ Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*. Harper & Row, 1973, pg. 15.

⁹ Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Popular Library Edition, Popular Library, 1962, pg. 34

¹⁰ Rubenstein, Harry. "The Gentleman's Agreement That Ended the Civil War." *Smithsonian Magazine*, 6 Apr. 2015, www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/gentlemans-agreement-ended-civil-war-180954810.

¹¹ Mark 10:17-22, NRSV

¹² Matthew 8:5-13, NRSV

¹³ Mark 2, 13-17, NRSV

¹⁴ Luke 19:1-10, NRSV

¹⁵ Luke 23:34