

Compassion, according to the Webster's dictionary is the sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it. The New Testament Greek verb for compassion means to be moved with pity or compassion from your heart or gut. Anne Lamott writes in her book Hallelujah Anyway that compassion is not just a feeling, it's an approach; it's the approach we take of accepting the mess of life as it presents itself and doing goodness anyway.

Pope Francis alludes to this in his recent sermon, where he discusses how we can have compassion for ourselves and others. He speaks about finding happiness in our lives by looking for ways to celebrate life, love, and God in our lives, with family and friends. He says even if they hurt us, even if we make mistakes, we can use our defeats to grow patience, we can use pain to tune into pleasure, we can use obstacles as opportunities to learn more. And, he says, we should never give up on ourselves or on others. We can make our and others' lives become gardens of opportunities for happiness, by having the courage to say "I'm sorry," by having the sense to say "I need you," and by having the ability to say "I love you." All of these are ways we show compassion to ourselves, and to others. And we can practice them every day! In fact, there is a movie out now, "A Man Called Otto," the American film with Tom Hanks, which explores how we can extend compassion to one another in many different ways, and how we can receive compassion through many different agents, some of them very surprising to us. Some of you may have seen this movie already.

So, let's return to our story of 5 loaves and 2 fish, found in all four gospels with fairly similar details. Those of you who manage large crowds, or who feed large numbers of people, or who can do simple mathematics know that this was a situation ripe for going south! 5000 men plus women and children in a deserted place for hours, when it's almost evening, with a journey home and no restaurants or grocery stores in sight... With only 5 loaves and 2 fish, here is the disciples' math: 1 loaf of bread per 1000 people, less than a half of a fish per 1000 people...and then there are the women and children to share with as well. We have no tables or chairs to organize groups of people in the space, no traffic lanes or signage for dispersing the crowds safely, ... what could go wrong? Everything! Not to mention the effect of fatigue and heat on the crowds which could give rise to stress and anger...!

"Jesus," we might whimper with the disciples, "it would take a miracle to make this situation not implode or explode!" The disciples ask Jesus to send the crowds away so the people can get food and go home. It's late, and we can imagine the disciples are hungry and would like to eat and leave, as well; and safely, without having to manage the crowds any more. They can see the situation very clearly from their personal, human point of view.

But how does Jesus see things? Remember he came here to this deserted place looking for a quiet place to process his thoughts and feelings about the murder of his cousin John the Baptist by King Herod. He was planning to have some time alone for prayer, but instead when they land their boat here on the other side of the lake, the crowds have preceded them and are hoping for Jesus to heal or teach them. Jesus, exhausted and disturbed and depressed by John's death, looks over the crowds and has compassion on them. How does he do that?! He must be looking with God's eyes, right? "With the eyes of his heart enlightened," as Paul writes in Ephesians 1:18, "to see the hope to which God calls us, the riches of our glorious inheritance from God, and the greatness of God's power available for us who believe." With that kind of vision through the eyes of his heart, Jesus has compassion, and he reaches out to the crowd with sympathy and a desire to heal.

Jesus, through God's eyes, sees us as God's children, full of potential, beloved and precious resources God has birthed here and now to experience and do wonderful works of blessing for the world. Jesus wants to heal us, to free us from our burdens, so that we can grow and develop our gifts that God has given to us to bring hope and joy to the world. We each have something to offer the world, to bring beauty, peace, and abundance

to all others in our time and space. Jesus and God believe in us, and count on us to join in God's enjoyment and development of the beloved community God designed to grow here from the very beginning. Our compassion can come from this perspective as well, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened by God and Christ's love.

So, Jesus, full of God's love and compassion, looks at the crowds and sets out walking among them, healing those who are sick and sharing words of encouragement with all. Some hours later, in the evening, the disciples, who have only enough food for their small group, tell Jesus to send the crowds away to get their own food in neighboring villages. They see a looming problem, and in their fatigue are unwilling to do any more for these others.

Jesus decides to stretch the disciples' vision and compassion – to demonstrate to the disciples and the crowds that they, by the power of God, are able to do "far more abundantly than they can ask or think" (as Paul writes a little later in Ephesians 3:20). Jesus says, "You give them something to eat!" The disciples tell Jesus that they only have 5 loaves and 2 fish among themselves. Jesus tells them "Bring those here to me." Then he tells the crowds to sit down, and prepares the food for communion fellowship, blessing, breaking, and giving the pieces to the disciples to share them out with the crowds. Jesus sees the need with God's eyes and heart, and meets the need with God's heart and hands.

Those of you who have studied the Bible have probably noticed the many similarities between this story and Moses and God feeding the Hebrew people in the wilderness, Elijah feeding a crowd in II Kings, Jesus sharing the Lord's supper with his disciples, and Jesus telling about the heavenly banquet yet to come. At this banquet with Jesus on the day after John's death, Jesus gives thanks for God's grace and healing done that day among the crowds; Jesus gives thanks for them having enough for everyone, with only 2 baskets of leftovers per 1000 people in the end. (That's not many leftovers when you do the math, is it?!) It is a feast given in peace, sharing rest and gathering strength before the journey home from that place. Jesus teaches us all that we can trust in God's provision and can accomplish miracles when we share Jesus' mindset of plenty, of generosity, of caring for community.

I love the way Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor, author, theologian and pastor today, frames Jesus and the disciples' assumptions and mindsets that day: She writes, "if the disciples operated out of a sense of scarcity, then what Jesus operated out of was a sense of plenty...Jesus saw plenty of time, plenty of food, and plenty of possibilities with the resources at hand...Jesus knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that wherever there was plenty of God, there would be plenty of everything else." She cautions us that "Miracles let us off the hook: we focus on God's responsibility to feed the crowd, save the world, and do it all, forgetting our own responsibility. We think, we do not have what it takes, after all. What we have to offer is not enough to make any difference at all, so we hold back and wait for the miracle, looking after our own needs, and looking for God to help those who cannot help themselves."

Dr. Taylor points out that "Jesus calls us to account, not sometime or somewhere else, but right here and now: Stop looking for someone else to solve the problem and solve it yourselves. Stop waiting for food to fall from the sky, and share what you have. Stop waiting for a miracle and **participate** in one instead. Begin by bringing what you have to me, Jesus says. There is no such thing as "your" bread or "my" bread, there is only "our" bread, as we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day **OUR** daily bread." However much you have, just bring it to me and believe that it is enough to begin with, enough to get the ball rolling, enough to start a trend. Be the first in the crowd to turn your pockets inside out, be the first on your block to start a miracle," writes Dr. Taylor.

Compassion means caring about the suffering of others, enough to start doing something about it. This is what John Wesley organized those early Methodists for: acts of compassion or mercy: besides their acts of piety – prayer groups, Bible study groups, they also had mission groups, to serve those in hospitals, orphanages, and prisons. Each week they got together for prayer, Bible study, **and service**. And they were to go to worship each day and fast each week. They were nothing if not methodical about all this! Compassion was built into the

system. Many among them knew the needs they were addressing, many of them had been in these places they served or had family and friends in them: they could empathize and sympathize with the suffering there, and by putting their group's resources together, they had enough to help, each week.

Our United Methodist Committee on Relief and Board of Global Ministries allow us to pool our resources so we can help alleviate suffering all around the world, with staff or churches in place to organize and deploy resources to best help local people recover from disasters. These agencies are one of the ways we have shown our compassion for those suffering in Kentucky, Ukraine, and around the world just in this past year alone!

Here in our own congregation, we show our compassion in many ways: through our Stephen Ministers, we come alongside those coping with tragedy or difficult changes in life, to listen and encourage folks as they recover and find new life. Through our Friendly Visitors, we reach out to those who are mostly homebound, unable to come to church very often, and remind them of our love and care, listen to their stories and share in prayer. Through our Caregiver groups we support and encourage those caring for loved ones in declining health, by listening and telling of our joys and sorrows, offering hope and help for problem-solving and strength to endure what cannot be solved. In these ways, we come alongside one another in compassion, taking one end of another's yoke, and sharing the burden, so that together we can reach the next place in our journey with Christ.

Compassion means seeing with God's eyes, the hope that God has for the blessing that person, creature or plant brings to the world. It means seeing and using the riches and power God offers to us, so that through us, healing can happen. It means being channels of grace and love and peace to one or two, or crowds of persons in need: at Lazarus House, at Hesed House, through Habitat for Humanity, or through TriCity Family Services, for children with CASA, or for seniors with Meals on Wheels! We each on our own can be channels of grace, and together, we can be a river of grace offering compassion to those who are broken here and around our world.

Jesus says to us today: You give them something to eat...bring your resources here for God's blessing, and then take them out to share with others...and lastly gather up the leftovers for us to use later on, so no blessing is wasted or lost...

How are you channeling your gifts to offer compassion to others as Jesus did? What does God see through your eyes, that calls forth your compassion to make a difference for good, to bless someone or some place in the world today? How might you bless, break, and share your resources with others to give others their daily bread, a hand up, a new opportunity, a new life? As one scholar points out, this story, shared in all four Gospels, clearly shows us that "No offering is too small for God to use."

Was the miracle the fact that Jesus had compassion enough to heal and feed folks when he was exhausted? Was the miracle that God turned 5 loaves and 2 fish into enough loaves and fish for 5000 men, plus women and children? Was the miracle that people shared the bread they each had brought into the baskets the disciples were passing around the crowds, so that all were fed? Any and all of these are miracles of compassion by Jesus, God, and the crowds, worthy of our reflection and prayer... so that we too, might be moved to such compassion in our lives and world today. May God open the eyes of our hearts, to see and have compassion for one another in our world; and may God bless and multiply our compassion to bring healing and hope for loving one another in these days! Amen.

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