

The Compassionate Christ

Genesis 32:22-31 & Matthew 14:13-21
Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616
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Genesis 32:22-32 (NIV)

²² That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. ²⁴ So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.

²⁶ Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." ²⁷ The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. ²⁸ Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." ²⁹ Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. ³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

³¹ The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. ³² Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon.

Matthew 14:13-21 (NIV)

¹³ When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. ¹⁵ As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."

¹⁶ Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." ¹⁷ "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered. ¹⁸ "Bring them here to me," he said.

¹⁹ And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. ²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ²¹ The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

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A few years ago, flight attendants for Southwest Airlines began spicing up their pre-flight

instructions to passengers with humor. Soon other airlines followed suit. After all, why talk to passengers when they're not listening?

One flight attendant began her routine this way, "In the event of a sudden loss of cabin pressure, masks will descend from the ceiling. Stop screaming, grab the mask, and pull it over your face. If you have a small child traveling with you, secure your mask before assisting with theirs. If you are traveling with more than one small child, pick your favorite."

Another attendant concluded a flight like this, "As you exit the plane, make sure to gather all of your belongings. Anything left behind will be distributed equally amongst the flight attendants. Please do not leave children or spouses."

On a recent Delta flight, the pilot announced that one passenger had left his belt and his jacket at the security checkpoint. "Pick them up today," he said, "or look for them tomorrow on eBay."

Educator Parker J. Palmer was in route to a conference when the plane he was on made an unexpectedly long layover at an airport. A truck that was supposed to deliver the refreshments for the next leg of the journey had broke down. Finally the pilot decided that it was more important to get his passengers on their way than to wait for the snacks to arrive, so he took off.

As soon as they were in the air the passengers started grumbling. "A ticket is a contract," said one loudly, "and snacks are part of the contract." "I ought to sue," another muttered. Then a man stood up and said, "I'm a lawyer. How many are willing to join in a class action suit?" A minor mutiny was in the works.

Then something interesting happened. A flight attendant came on the public address system. She began with the familiar information on such flights: "Ladies and gentlemen, the captain has turned off the seatbelt lights. We have now attained a cruising altitude of 30,000 feet."

Then she said something quite extraordinary: "Having served many of you on the first leg of this flight, I know some of you still have your bags of peanuts, which you stuffed in your pocket. How many do we have? Five? Please open them and share them with the people around you. I'm sure some of you have mints. Would you pass these around, also? Those of you with newspapers, you can only read one section at a time. Spread the other sections around for others to read. Some of you are parents or grandparents. Take out the pictures of your children or grandchildren and show them to others."

With that brief announcement she changed the emotional climate of that flight. Later, when the flight attendant came near Parker Palmer's seat he asked her, "What's your name? What's the name of your supervisor? I want to write a letter of commendation. That was the best example of group leadership I've ever seen." To which, she replied, "The loaves and fishes still work."

Do you know what she was referring to? There are many scholars who believe this is exactly what happened when Jesus fed the great multitude with only five barley loaves and two small fish. People

shared with one another.

You heard the story read this morning. An enormous crowd of people had followed Jesus out into the wilderness. Evening was approaching. Jesus knew that the crowd would be getting hungry. “Send them away,” advised Jesus’ disciples. “Let them go into the villages to buy food for themselves.” “That is not necessary,” Jesus replied, “we can supply them with food.”

Well, you can imagine the disciples’ surprise when He said that. “That’s absurd,” they probably thought. “We barely have enough for us.” One of the disciples, Philip, remarked that it would take more than half a year’s wages to feed a crowd like this. It was out of the question. But another disciple, Andrew, had noticed a young boy in the crowd, and this lad had five barley loaves and two fish.

Now, please do not misunderstand. “Five barley loaves” is not the same as having five loaves of bread. According to biblical scholar, William Barclay, the “loaves” were small rather like pita bread. The fish were little salt fish the size of sardines, to act as a relish for eating the dry bread. Very likely the boy had set out with his lunch in the morning, had seen the crowds, and had joined them. Most likely, says Barclay, Andrew made the suggestion about the boy and his lunch shyly and with embarrassment. It seemed so utterly inadequate.

But they weren’t inadequate. Five rolls and two tiny fish are plenty in the Master’s hand. Indeed, when they were finished distributing the food, twelve baskets full were left over. How did this happen? How did the Master feed so many with so little?

Personally I believe this was a miracle, a sign, to make the people ask, “Who is this man?” To help them come to the conclusion that Jesus is their long awaited Messiah. Some scholars who don’t believe in miracles believe the crowd brought food with them, but kept it concealed until this small boy offered to share his lunch and thereby shamed the others into offering theirs. This is the principle to which the flight attendant was referring. When we share, the amount available seems to multiply. You know, if you have ever been to a church carry-in meal, why there was food left over.

It is significant that all four gospels tell variations of this story of the feeding of the multitude. Matthew and Mark tell some version of it twice (Matt 14:13-21; 15:32-39; Mark 6:32-44; 8:1-10; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15). There are very few miracles that have that level of reporting. That this event took place can scarcely be denied. The scriptural evidence is overwhelming. On at least one occasion, we can say with certainty, the Master fed a great multitude of people.

Most of us don’t really care how Jesus did this with only five barley loaves and two tiny fish. What is important to us is what this story says to us about Christ.

FIRST OF ALL, THIS STORY SHOWS US CHRIST’S COMPASSION.

In fact the first thing we read in this story is that Jesus, seeing the large crowd of people, “had compassion on them....” But we expect that out of Jesus. Jesus came with one purpose and desire; to

seek and to save the lost. When Jesus gazed out over Jerusalem, He wept with compassion (Luke 19:41). He knew the heartaches, the headaches, and the hungers that go with being human. And Jesus still has compassion. He still weeps over the plight of His people.

Jesus Christ has compassion because He has been where we are; doubted, denied, betrayed and broken in body. So when we hurt, Jesus understands, for He has been hurt too.

A man named Al Wiener survived the Nazi concentration camps of World War II. He entered a labor camp when he was 15. The years in those camps took their toll. Over time his weight dropped to 80 pounds and he was weak and always hungry. He was slowly starving to death.

In one labor camp he worked in a textile factory. There were German women who worked in the factory. But they were forbidden from speaking to prisoners like Al. They were not even allowed to look them in the eye. One day a German woman pointed, motioning for Al to go to another part of the room. Al waited until no one was looking and he went to the spot she had picked out. She pointed to a crate and walked away. Al lifted the crate and found a sandwich.

A precious, precious sandwich. How we take such riches for granted. Al ate the sandwich quickly while no one was looking.

Every day for two months the woman left a sandwich under that crate for him. She risked her life for him. Al says her sandwiches probably saved his life.

Al believes that God used this woman's heroic and charitable acts to save him so that today he can tell others his story, and the story of millions of unfortunate people who were executed by the Nazis.

What would the world be without compassionate people, people who are willing to feel the pain of those less fortunate than themselves? Compassion is a gift from God.

Meister Eckhart, the 13th century mystic wrote, "You may call God love, you may call God goodness. But the best name for God is compassion." No one had more compassion than Jesus of Nazareth. He who lay down His life for sinful humanity. Jesus is compassionate.

AND JESUS CHRIST IS CAPABLE.

That's the second thing we need to see. He is capable. Our needs may be physical or emotional or spiritual, but Christ's power is sufficient.

This may be the point at which many of us are missing the joy of our faith. We believe that God cares about us and our need, but we don't really believe that He is able to help us. And so we lead joyless, powerless lives. But what good is compassion without capability? God is able!

A man named Orion Steen has a slogan emblazoned on the cover of the spare tire on the back of his Suburban Wagon. It reads, "I CAN'T! GOD CAN! I'LL LET HIM."

Orion had retired from the Honeywell Corporation where he was a successful manager. He was used to giving orders and being in control. Then one day the police came to Orion's home and arrested his adopted son. Orion didn't know it, but his son was dealing drugs from the family home.

For once in his life Orion faced a situation where he couldn't call the shots. He was devastated. He went to his church and asked for help in dealing with this heartbreaking situation. Asking for help was unfamiliar territory for Orion. Fortunately there was a group of people in his church who had gone through the same kind of pain in dealing with a family member who was addicted to drugs or alcohol. They met weekly to support one another. This group helped Orion through this situation.

His son was sentenced to five years in jail. Orion visited him every week, but he could not seem to reach the boy with the seriousness of what he had done. After he was released he turned again to selling drugs. Again, he served a five-year stretch in jail. And again Orion visited him every week.

This time, however, the young man began to come around. It was in the midst of the second jail term that his son made a decision to surrender his life to Jesus Christ.

Orion said, "I had to learn the hard way that only God can change a person's life. Only God has the authority to forgive our sins and set us on a new path. That's why I have the slogan on the back of my car: "I CAN'T! GOD CAN! I'LL LET HIM." I try to remember that every day. We have a God who not only cares about our needs, but is capable of meeting those needs.

BUT THERE IS ONE MORE THING THAT NEEDS TO BE SAID: NOTE THE COMPLICITY OF THE YOUNG BOY.

What if that young man had not been willing to share his five loaves and two fish? Undoubtedly, Christ would still have found a way to feed the multitude, but it does seem to be a clear principle of faith that Christ works best when He has something to work with. It may be fishes and bread, it might be a tiny baby like Moses hidden in the bulrushes, but it's obvious that God likes something to work with. God wants us involved in what God is going to do in the saving of the world.

You and I live in a time of amazing advances in the world of medicine. So many diseases that plagued other generations no longer are a threat. Mortality rates for common killers like cancer, heart attacks and strokes are declining.

Conversely people are living longer and longer. Humanity has been on this planet thousands of years. The cures we enjoy in our time have been present in nature since the beginning of time. Why are we only enjoying the benefits now? It's because God, who is the source of all healing, chooses to wait until human beings of their own initiative cull from careful study the causes of the ailments that vex God's children.

These miraculous cures could have been ours hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years earlier, but humanity is so estranged from God that it has wandered in darkness. We have been preoccupied with our vices such as greed, lust, hatred, war, rather than focusing on those things that God has intended for us to make life better. Life may best be understood as a partnership, an active relationship, between humanity and God. That is true in medicine, and it is true in every part of life.

St. Paul spoke to this in 2 Corinthians 5:18 when he wrote, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation....” This is what our purpose is in life. It is to work with God in building a better world, a world that is as God intended it to be. God provides the inspiration, we provide the perspiration. God provides the miraculous power, but someone needs to offer the barley loaves and the tiny fish.

Christ has compassion for our needs. And He is able to meet our needs. But Christ needs something to work with. Look at your life right now. Do you have a need? Christ can meet that need. Is there something, though, that you need to place in His hands first, something you can do to help the situation?

Look at the needs of those around you. Does someone you know have a need? God can meet that need. Is there something you can offer for God to work with? Orion Steen’s adopted son found Christ in prison. Do you think that his father’s weekly visits over a period of more than five years had anything to do with that transformation? I suspect they were the five barley loaves and the two tiny fish God needed to work a miracle in this young man’s heart.

Christ cares. Christ is capable. All Christ needs is for us to give Him something to work with; mostly ourselves. Then we will see the amazing things God can do.

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