

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Amy Toney

Compassionate Shepherd

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

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I am honored to be in the pulpit today and am truly thankful for this community of friends.

Today in our lectionary text of Mark 6, we hear what is probably a familiar passage--as the events leading up to the feeding of the 5000. But today, we aren't quite at that point in our text. So go back with me a bit as we see Jesus inviting the disciples to come away with him to a quiet place for rest. This group has been through a lot in the past days as the 12 were sent out into the region for ministry and have returned, only to experience the death of John the Baptist and growing unrest in Jerusalem. And you can imagine the disciples are feeling a little up and down emotions of life, and as we learn, we haven't even had time to eat. What we find is Jesus, seeing the disciples, invites them to quiet and rest- sounds nice, right? But as they come to know, and as many of us know, those quiet places of rest sometimes don't last long, and the next thing we read is that their quiet and rest are interrupted.

The text says that:

"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things."

This phrase caught my attention as I read our text for today- This idea- **that Jesus saw the crowd, was moved to compassion for them because of their need and then began to respond**, or in this case, teach them. I discovered that this is not just a one-time phrase, in fact, this same pattern of Jesus seeing an individual or a crowd, having compassion on them, and then responding in some manner- usually teaching or healing- is repeated at least 6 other times in the Gospels.

I pray that in digging deeper into this pattern today we might experience again the compassion and kindness of Christ in our own lives, as the crowd did that day, and that we are encouraged to show that compassion to those around us as we faithfully participate in the upside-down kingdom Jesus is demonstrating in the book of Mark.

Let's start with *seeing of the crowd*.

In this passage, Jesus makes time to see the crowd- he is not too preoccupied with his own agenda, he instead lives a life that seems to welcome interruptions. He doesn't turn around and run back to the boat to pretend he didn't see people and hope to head to another quiet beach. He instead takes time and sees the crowd in front of him.

Mark tells us in the text that Jesus not only physically sees the crowd but somehow discerns and recognizes this crowd has needs, because they are a people like sheep without a shepherd. This highlights that Jesus didn't only see physical needs, as I'm sure he wasn't commenting on the crowd's body condition, parasite load, grazing habits, or hoof rot (farm sheep joke), but instead

speaks to the neglect of authorities at the time in the spiritual and emotional care of the people. Jesus, as our Good Shepherd, recognizes this need of the crowd and is moved to respond.

Good shepherds *see* their sheep- they observe the sheep, watching for behaviors that could indicate illness or injury. Shepherds keep them from going down paths or into pastures that could be harmful; they protect and provide for them. Good shepherds have *proximity* to their sheep. In this text and others in the Gospel writings, Jesus chooses to have proximity to his people. He is not found only in the synagogues or temples but also in the streets, the marketplaces, the gathering areas of the time, and even in people's homes. We find him among the people. He is God *incarnate*- God with us. This is good news for us even today- that Christ sees us, has compassion towards us, and is with us.

As Jesus *sees* the crowd he is then *moved to compassion*.

I'm no Greek scholar, but I find looking at the Greek word here for "moved to compassion" to be quite interesting. The word for compassion is to be moved as to one's bowels or gut, and at the time this was thought to be the seat of emotion, much like we would describe the heart today. Not just to have pity for someone, but to be moved to something. Keep that in mind as we talk about Jesus being moved to compassion. Another more modern definition of compassion is "to suffer with," or "to suffer together."

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus responds to people around him with this type of compassion. He has compassion towards the sick and outcast of society, the lepers, and those who are blind and deaf. He has compassion towards women and children, drawing them to himself, being in proximity with them, even as they are unclean or the low of low. He has compassion towards the Jews and the Gentiles. He has compassion toward the hungry and the lonely, those grieving and mourning. Jesus models for us that compassion isn't relegated only to those who look, think, believe, or act like us but toward all of creation. And he doesn't just step in to fix the problem, although he could, or solve something for people, he truly is modeling an upside-down kingdom where the Messiah, the Son of God, desires not to be served but to serve, not to only be followed or distantly sit on his throne away from his subjects but to be among us, in proximity.

Church, this is good news still for us today- that Christ sees us and has compassion toward us. He knows our failures, our shortcomings, the overwhelming anxieties or emotions, the rough day at work or of parenting, the grief and uncertainty. He knows our needs, and he sees us. And he has compassion toward us- toward you today. May that be a reminder of the peace of Christ today- that God sees me, is compassionate toward me—and you, and is with us.

In Colossians, we are encouraged as followers of Christ to *put on* or clothe ourselves with this same compassion that Christ is modeling. Colossians says, "*So, as those who have been chosen by God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so must you do also.*"

As we see Jesus having compassion, we are exhorted to do likewise in the relationships we have- not only loving our friends and family or those close to us, but also to love, pray for, stand with,

and have compassion towards those who are our enemies- those who don't think or believe like we do.

One thing that drew us as a family to DaySpring is the spiritual formation of our kids that takes place here. Pastor Amy and her team do such an amazing job with the curriculum and intentionality of our kids' formation, and we are so grateful. I was encouraged to hear a story from Compassion Camp this summer, which is our version of Vacation Bible School here at DaySpring. This year, kids were encouraged to make bags of items to hand out to people around town on the streets who might be experiencing homelessness. As we talked about this with some of our friends, the kids at the table began to have ideas about getting together to make more bags because they had seen more people on the streets, but they didn't have any more bags. Our friends also shared a story with us that they had given their bag to a person who had been very thankful, especially for the chapstick and sunscreen that were inside.

Among emotion researchers, compassion is defined as "the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering." The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California Berkley says that cultivating compassion often begins with simple acts of kindness (such as the giving of these bags), that then in turn put a human face to suffering, encouraging more compassionate responses. Compassion and empathy often go hand-in-hand and simple ways of connecting relationally, or having proximity to, those around us can help form us to be more Christlike in our responses of compassion.

Thirdly, Jesus *responds*.

As he has seen the crowd, been moved to compassion for them, and now he is responding. What is challenging about this response portion is that Jesus doesn't seem to set a formula of exactly how to respond to every person in every situation that you may come across either in his own ministry or in our life, now. We can't copy/paste the interaction he has, nor to the interactions or situations we find ourselves in today that need compassionate responses. Sometimes Jesus seems to meet physical needs, such as restoring someone's sight or hearing or feeding the hungry. Other times Jesus chooses to teach the crowds. Still, other times he seems to respond in multiple ways to an individual or crowd- like in our story today. First, he teaches this crowd, and then, because it's getting late and people are hungry, he tells the disciples to feed the crowd, leading to the miraculous feeding of the 5000 that we might be familiar with.

While we don't have a formula or rule book to follow on how exactly to respond in every situation, what we do know and what we can see in the text is that Jesus chooses to respond and not ignore the situations around him. We may not always respond correctly or know even how to best help someone in front of us, but Jesus shows the way of love by seeing those around him, having compassion for them, and responding to their needs. As we think through what might be our own compassionate responses, we can do likewise. We can draw near to people in proximity, try to understand and see their situations; have compassion, desire to empathize and suffer with them, and try to discern how to respond in meaningful and thoughtful ways as faithful witnesses to the love of Christ.

Friends, as we experience this passage again together this morning and see the compassion of Christ, may we practice receiving that compassion of Christ in our own lives, and ask how are we to practice giving this same compassion to others as we seek to love God and neighbor.

I would invite us to discern with the Spirit ways that we can receive this and give this to those around us, have compassion toward them, see the person in front of us, and respond in love. Maybe you know someone at work who needs a listening ear or a gentle hug, or someone who might need a warm meal or cool drink of water. Perhaps you feel the nudge to welcome someone into your home or make your own bags of items to hand out around town. It is my strong belief that each of us, as a congregation, has been placed by God in proximity to people as witnesses to the love and compassion of God.

Wherever you may find yourself this week, I pray that you may know the compassion of Christ in your heart and that you are encouraged to see those around you and step towards someone in compassionate ways. May we continue to be formed in the likeness of Christ, our Good Shepherd.

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