

“Compassion and Appropriate Response” – Matt. 14: 13-21

Has Jesus looked with Compassion on you? In the text today, Jesus comes ashore in what he expected to be a deserted beach and when he saw the crowd who had come to see him, he looked with compassion on them, and he healed them, says the text. The parallel text of the same incident as recorded in Mark 6, says that Jesus had compassion for the crowd because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them, as a leader would. All of this was the Lord's response out of compassion. What is the appropriate response when one feels compassion? Not just crying with them, which Jesus did do when he had compassion for Mary and Martha when their brother Lazarus had died. Not just platitudes like “thoughts and prayers”! But tangible acts of compassion. Feeding the hungry, protecting the vulnerable. And then when the vulnerable are done in by the systems of the world, speaking against the injustice. Like not just praying for the migrants but working for comprehensive immigration reform and the honoring of the agreements that once welcomed the refugees and asylum seekers – because we are a civilized nation – and then summarily sending them back into harm's way. While the ELCA, even our Southeastern Synod and our Global Refuge (the rebranded LIRS) is in court contesting new legislation, are some of us saying, “Go back to your country!” or “Stop taking our jobs!” – which we all know is a lie. I won't even talk about the so-called “crime” narrative – another lie because US-born Americans do more than twice the number of violent crimes – even killing multiple people in what is called mass murders – than undocumented people and naturalized Americans. What is compassion and the appropriate response? It must make us uncomfortable. It may put us at risk.

When Jesus exposed the corruption and oppression of the poor by the rich and powerful in religion and politics, they killed him. Even in the Gospel narrative today, his own people thought he was crazy to want to feed those thousands of people. But compassion determined the appropriate response. Sometimes it takes miracles, especially when natural means fail or are not accessible to us.

In the narrative, Jesus performs a miracle by feeding the thousands from 5 loaves and 2 fish. It's not always that the 4 gospel writers, relate the same incident or narrative with as much clarity, but with this, they all talk about the five loaves and 2 fish and the feeding of the thousands, five thousand of whom were men. Now I don't know why they couldn't count the women and children as well so that we could know with greater accuracy how many people actually were fed; perhaps it's the shortcoming or handicap of a patriarchal society.

Any society that treats women as less than or unequal to men is handicapped, Jesus challenged that, but that's a whole sermon on its own.

So regardless of how many human beings were fed, this is a miracle. All the gospel writers also say that the leftovers, you know the stuff we take home after a potluck, were 12 baskets full! Talking about potluck, many "modern" Christians or Christian sceptics believe that this was not really a miracle but a potluck. They say Jesus blessed this young boy's meal, as John's narrative describes it, and then people took out all their lunch boxes and shared it. And just as it is with our potlucks today, we always have too much food, so much left over, right.

So this was not a miracle but a teaching on sharing that Jesus was using a young boy and his lunch to teach a virtue. That is what many "modern" people say.

In fact, sceptics and many scripture critics, even Christian ones, present so-called logical, natural explanations for just about every miracle in the New and Old Testament. It's a pity that we cannot accept that the compassion of God for people at the point of their need would move the God of the Universe to miraculously intervene.

There's a Christian song that goes:

"Give me that old time religion... it is good enough for me...

"It was Good for Paul and Silas... and it's good enough for me."

This old Southern gospel song dated back to the 1800s so saying "old time" then, means even before that. Two hundred years before, when slavery began in the US. Or all the way back - to Paul and Silas when the chains fell off them and the doors of the prison miraculously opened so they walked out and everyone was in awe! Give me that old time religion. When we believed that God would do miracles.

Why do we pray our prayers of intercession if we don't believe that God answers them? Modern Christians say it's just a psycho-spiritual necessity, Giving us some confidence and comfort in difficult situations – that's all. This may sound strange, but God is still a God who can perform supernatural things – miracles. God hasn't become less powerful. Humans have created a less powerful, less supernatural God. Why? Because we want to be in control.

When it comes down to it, perhaps these expressions of goodness are fruits of the spirit and therefore part of the miracle of rebirth! That is good, but that does not detract from the fact, I say fact, that God is still as powerful and able. That God can still do as Paul says in Ephesians 3, "exceedingly abundantly, above more than we can ask, or even think." I know some are saying, yes but read the context of Paul's statement. You know miracles are not for today, it's not Lutheran – I'm not going

to dignify that assertion with an argument. However, let me put paid to this skepticism with a personal story: I was serving a small congregation in a big church building. The roof was old and one rainy season we had to have buckets and bowls all over the sanctuary and fellowship hall to catch the drips. We were in outreach mode and it was embarrassing. We knew it was unlikely that new people we invited would come back to that mess. The quote to fix it was \$330,000. The congregation only had 17 regular giving units. We decided to first pray. We prayed for a miracle. We started a capital campaign with faith. Before the next rainy season, we had a brand new roof and it was fully paid for. I'm sure you have stories like that, perhaps from grandma.

Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey sang, "When you believe" in 1998. "There can be miracles, When you believe.." I know some say this is about believing in yourself and all that, but listen to these lines:

In this time of fear
When prayer so often proves in vain
Hope seems like the summer bird
Too swiftly flown away
Yet now I'm standing here
My hearts so full, I can't explain
Seeking faith and speakin' words
I never thought I'd say

God's compassion for us in times of need, may send others to help or it can lead to miracles. Do you have doubts and fear? Let's take everything to God in Prayer, like the hymn says, EVERYTHING. Even if it seems impossible. Let's recapture and reclaim the faith in the God of the impossible. That may change, not only our perspective of God, but of life as we know it. That's God's compassion and our appropriate response is, "Amen!"