

COMPASSION FOR THEM

He gets into a boat and goes to a deserted place. Well, that is what he wanted to do. He had just heard about the terrible execution by King Herod of his cousin John the Baptist. And just before that, Jesus had been teaching in his home town when they tried to kill him because he had the audacity to rise above his station in life. He's down in the dumps. He's tired, the 12 disciples are tired. They seriously need some down time. But Jesus can't get a break. The crowds follow him "and he had compassion for them."

So, instead of blowing them off or sending them a tweet, he gets out of the boat and he embraces them. He heals the sick and talks to them about the Kingdom of Heaven on earth that he has come to establish. Instead of tending to his own personal needs, he tends to theirs. He stays with them for hours and hours. At the end of the day the disciples are like OK, Lord, now it's really time to take a break. And anyway, these people are getting hungry. Send them away so they can find something to eat.

And everyone knows what happens next right?

Actually, in the old days everyone knew this story. But that's not the case anymore. I always love it when Jeopardy has the Bible as one of the categories because it's the only time I can always do better than the contestants. Several years ago, I asked my 5 nieces and nephews if they would know what I was talking about if I referred to "the loaves and the fishes" or "feeding the multitude." These young adults are all over the top smart, they got into the best schools and received academic scholarships. They come from good, affluent homes. No divorces. But church and faith were not part of their upbringing. They had no clue what I was talking about.

I'm pretty sure there are even a few people here today who are not that familiar the miraculous feeding of five thousand. But I wonder, for those of you

who have heard it and heard it, what would your answer be if I asked you what is the point of this story?

It reveals the divinity of Jesus. Only God could work such a miracle. Right answer.

It is about the abundance of God's love shared with humankind through the incarnation of Christ. Even more right.

What we have in this story is a profound revelation of the stark contrast between the character of the divine who became human, and the usual human response to the troubles of the poor, the downtrodden, the immigrants among us.

This is the only miracle story that appears in all four Gospels. Obviously, it was *very* important for the early church. At first thought, that might seem a little odd. Compared to some, it's really not that great of a miracle. It isn't like bringing someone back from the dead. There are several of those miracles (Mk. 5:4; Jn. 11:43) And it pales in comparison to controlling the weather or walking on water, both of which Jesus also did. (Matt. 8:26; 14:25).

What is it about this miracle that made it so important to the early church, but also all through the centuries? The answer is right there at the beginning of the passage. He had compassion for them.

Compassion is at the heart of the Gospel. The Gospel is about God's love for the world. God loves the good and the bad, the sinner and the saint, the Jew and the Gentile, the American of European descent and the illegal immigrant, the banker and the preschool teacher, the doctors and even the lawyers. God loves us all.

And Jesus never withheld that love. He didn't say "I'm really tired and I'm grieving over John and I need some space." He didn't say "they will never learn to be responsible and self-sufficient if we just give them a hand out." He didn't say, "they are not our responsibility, we didn't make them come out here." He didn't say "only give food to those who make a commitment to follow me."

In this story, we learn what it means to follow Jesus. If we call ourselves disciples, if we call ourselves Christian, we understand that he calls us into his ministry. Discipleship is an awesome responsibility that God has entrusted to us. And there is more to discipleship than praise and worship.

Jesus said: you do it. “You give them something to eat.” Following Jesus means *expressing* our faith through our actions. Following Jesus means *sharing* our faith through our actions. It means concrete acts of love, justice, and compassion for others. It is in Matthew’s Gospel that Jesus says whoever feeds the hungry, welcomes the stranger, visits the imprisoned—whoever provides for the least of these, serves Christ. It’s all about action. It’s about walking the walk.

There is no end to the ways Jesus calls us to action and it can seem like an impossible task. But that doesn’t mean there is no reason to try. The poverty rate in Jesus’ day was around 90% of the population. His ministry didn’t change the statistic. But that didn’t stop him and it didn’t stop him from telling his disciples to keep trying.

Maybe if Christians in America today were known for actions of love more than words of hate and anger, people like my nieces and nephews and millions of others born in the second half of the 20th century would have some interest in hearing what Christianity is really all about. There’s no way to know. But there’s no harm in trying either. As Bruce Reyes Chow said in the benediction every night at the Montreat Youth Conference, it’s just that simple and it’s just that hard.