

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Bart Roush

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Matthew 15:29–38

Let us pray for inspiration from and an awareness of God’s Spirit.

Living God, help us so to hear your holy Word that we may truly understand; that, understanding, we may believe, and, believing, we may follow in all faithfulness and obedience, seeking your honor and glory in all that we do; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

After Jesus had left that place, he passed along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up the mountain, where he sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them, so that the crowd was amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.

Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.” The disciples said to him, “Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?” Jesus asked them, “How many loaves have you?” They said, “Seven, and a few small fish.” Then ordering the crowd to sit down on the ground, he took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all of them ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. Those who had eaten were four thousand men, besides women and children.

Over the last 20+ years of ministry, one of my most-loved things to participate in is bible study, a regular meeting with a group of people to investigate, question, and imagine what scripture might have to say to our current circumstance. Shortly after arriving at Oak Grove, we began a weekly bible study at noon. We meet virtually and we talk for about an hour about the scripture that is the basis for the sermon the following Sunday. Anyone is welcome to join at any time, and its ok if you can't make it each week, and you can bring your lunch.

It was a practice I started at my very first call. And those that participate with me over these two decades have often heard me utter the phrase, "this is one of my favorite scriptures..." or "I love this story."

I know, even in my first year with you here, some of you have heard me talk about some of my favorite theological terms or words.

There is the phrase that even my children will quote to you if I say what is one of my favorite theological terms, both because it is a mouthful and because I like what it means, "epistemological perspectivism." It means how we know things are influenced by our perspective, our context, our history. Not only do we have a point of view. but we have a view from a point. But not all of my favorite phrases and words are big.

"Therefore" is one of my most favorite theological words. It is used by Paul frequently. He will lay out a theological argument or foundation and then say, "therefor..." which indicates an active faith. A theology that is put into action. "God loves us unconditionally and we do nothing to earn God's love, therefore..."

One of my favorite Greek words is in this passage from today, as well as last weeks passage. I'm pretty sure I have mentioned this word to you all before as well, the word is "Splachna"

This word is normally translated as “had compassion,” but I’m not sure that captures it fully. It really refers to a gut-wrenching, intestinal-twisting, visceral emotion of care. In the Gospels, it is never simply an emotion, it is a *deep emotion* that moves Jesus or another to saving action. It moves the so-called Good Samaritan to save the beaten man. It moves Jesus to heal one man and raise a woman’s dead son. It moves a waiting father to have mercy on his prodigal son. And so on. Here, the deep compassion that Jesus has on the great crowd moves him first to heal their sick, and then to feed the masses.

The point isn’t *what* Jesus does, but *why*. Because the character of the God Jesus reveals and represents is captured in a single word, “compassion.” Matthew says that when Jesus saw the great crowd that had followed him, he had compassion on them. And so, he healed their sick, tended their needs, and shared with them his presence. And then, when evening came and they found themselves without food, he fed them.

Jesus is moved with deep empathy, deep compassion, overwhelming love. Jesus has all the feels. This is a big deal.

One scholar notes that, “In the first century, you see, gods aren’t normally supposed to care about people like the crowds. The gods of the ancient philosophers, for instance, were considered dispassionate and so were regularly referred to by cozy names like “the Unmoved Mover” or “First Cause.” At the other end of the spectrum, the gods of the Greek and Roman empires were notorious for using humans as playthings and for ordering the world to their whims. At best, gods were supposed to take the side of the rich and powerful.”

We, perhaps, have grown accustomed to a God that is incarnate, that shows up in flesh and blood and feels deep emotions. But that has been, and perhaps still is, offensive to some.

Aristotle viewed God as “the unmoved mover.” An “immortal, unchanging being” who initiated and undergirds all of reality, but who never changes.

It was this view of God as one unchanging—and in fact incapable of being moved emotionally—that led the early Christian heretic Marcion to declare that the true God, far from being moved, was “a better God, who is neither offended nor does he get angry, nor does he take vengeance.”¹

But that is not the God we worship.

The real wonder of this story is that God still cares deeply and passionately for those who are most vulnerable, the poor, the immigrant, the hungry.

Let us not rush past Jesus’ deep emotions. In fact, let us not rush at all.

This week, during the bible study we noted a couple of things. The first was that all of this took place over three days. Jesus was on top of the mountain healing people for three full days. And the people kept coming and coming. And we don’t know for sure how long, but it says they stayed to praise and worship God. Can you imagine the chaos of the scene? Thousands of people trying to carry their loved ones to get close to Jesus so he can touch them and heal them, the people that have already been healed singing and shouting or joy to God in worship, the disciples trying to manage it all. It must have been something.

And then in the midst of all of this chaos, Jesus orders the crowd to sit down. Now, that must have taken some time, that must have been a real ordeal. But he wants them to sit down. There is a trick in business to manage time.

One of the things businesspeople are taught is how to communicate through non-verbal action. When you don't have a lot of time to deal with another person, time management practices say to never sit down. If you remain standing, it signals to the person you don't have time for them, and they will be signaled to not dally, not to stay long.

Standing up moves people on and sitting doesn't. There is a story that a company once removed all the chairs from its executive conference room. All meetings were held with the people standing up. Faster execution, less waffling back and forth, decisions get made faster.

Well, that's not how Christ operates. This is no business meeting with executive leadership. There is no agenda, no worry about efficiency, no hurry, no competition. Sit down, stay awhile. Sit down, hang out with Jesus. Don't rush off, make sure you are nourished for the journey. Sit a spell.

There comes a stage in most any relationship of depth where you eat together. That's often how we indicate that we want a relationship to develop; to get closer. It's all very well chatting to people, at work or socially, but if you really want to get to know them, you share a meal. You take time. Jesus takes time... and feels deeply.... and is motivated to care.

This is good news, “because it means that when we suffer and raise our prayers and groans to God, we can rely on the fact that God will hear our words, see our suffering, and that God will care, God will feel compassion for us.”ⁱ

And my goodness, the world needs compassion. And, as we talked about last week as well, that is the ministry into which we are called as well. Jesus is all about compassion.

Jesus uses the disciples, even when they would rather look after themselves, to tend the needs of these thousands of men, women, and children. Using words and actions foreshadowing the Last Supper, Matthew depicts what happens when you move from a worldview of scarcity, “we have nothing here but five loaves and fishes,” to one of abundance, “thank you, God, for these five loaves and fishes.” Whatever their initial skepticism, or doubt, or self-preoccupation, the disciples are caught up in Jesus words of abundance and gratitude and distribute what they have and participate in the wonder and joy that “all ate and were filled.” God used even these reluctant disciples, that is, to care for the poor and hungry that God loves so much.

As one scholar says, “So let us dwell with Jesus, a God who is moved to pity, compassion, anger, outrage, despair, and mercy. This is one of the true outcomes of the incarnation. The Word made flesh is so flesh that he is moved to compassion. And this is good news.”ⁱⁱ

I know many of us have more than enough anger, outrage, and despair. So let us also live into the good news of God’s compassion and mercy. As I mentioned last week, even when we don’t think we have enough, the good news is that the God of compassion is still with us. And the good news is that we don’t have to do this alone, that we don’t do this alone. Even when we feel like, “I’ve got nothing, or next to nothing,” nothing left for this ministry, next to nothing left for my family and friends, next to nothing left for this particular moment, we can take comfort that, as we see in the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes out of compassion that next to nothing is Jesus’ favorite thing to work with.

When we stay in our fears that there will not be enough or perhaps, we aren’t good enough, when we just want to send others away to fend themselves, we inevitably withhold the loving kindness and compassion that we have been so generously given. On the other hand, when we let

go of our fears and concerns about our own well-being, at least when the situation calls for it, and open our hearts to the people we encounter with a giving spirit, we become channels of the divine compassion that can have a truly miraculous effect.

Our compassion, our loving kindness may be small and faltering, but if we will just give what we have, perhaps in the giving it will be multiplied to meet the needs. When we give compassion freely, it ripples out far beyond our ability to explain or even imagine. When we open ourselves to be channels of compassion, those streams of kindness and mercy that flow through us have an effect that only God knows.

Amen.

ⁱ Rolf Jacobson, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/the-god-who-feels-and-feeds>

ⁱⁱ Ibid