

*“Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.’ But Jesus said, ‘They need not go away; you give them something to eat.’ They said to him, ‘We have only five loaves here and two fish.’ And he said, ‘Bring them here to me.’ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.”*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

A parent speaks of their fear and despair in finding out that their infant child is suffering from severe cancer. We see that child, perhaps lying in a hospital bed hooked up to an IV pump, or we see them swathed in bandages, bravely walking down a hospital corridor. The parents then speak of the hope that they have found through the care and compassion of the St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. Who can watch these ads and not feel something? We experience that same feeling when the Children's Miracle Network holds their telethons or fund-raisers. To see these pictures of sick and suffering children tugs at our hearts; in fact, it would take a very hard-hearted person not to be moved by these images in some way.

In our text today, we are told that Jesus saw the crowds and that *he had compassion on them and healed their sick*. The word for compassion in our text is the Greek word *spagchnizomai*. It means “his gut moved.” He has a gut reaction to the needs of the people. He feels it deep inside, in His heart, in His stomach. For the ancients, it would have suggested feeling it in the kidneys or the bowels. It is a strong way of saying that the needs that Jesus saw in the crowds elicit a strong reaction. Jesus experienced the same gut reaction we often feel in sad situations.

We live in a world that is hurting. We live in a world filled with sorrow and tragedy and all manners of heart-break. People die in plane crashes, like the one last weekend that resulted in the death of 5 men from Harvest Hills Alliance Church and one from RockPointe Church. There is the heartbreak that comes when someone we love is diagnosed with cancer. There are the hurts that come when homes are destroyed by fire or floods; by earthquakes or tornadoes. There is the pain of loss when someone is murdered or dies in a senseless accident. Of course, the closer we are to the particular situation and to the people involved, the more we will feel that gut reaction, that compassion that goes out at that moment. The closer we are, the more likely we are to act for the care and relief of others.

Our word, “compassion” literally means “to suffer together.” Among emotion researchers, it is defined as the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering. Compassion is not the same as empathy, although the concepts are related. Empathy is feeling another person's pain—something we really can't do—whereas compassion is taking action to relieve the suffering of others. That is the compassion we see in Jesus and through our lessons today.

Our text today is the account of the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. We look at the miracle as a wonderful testimony to God's providing care. The Lord can take five loaves and two small fish and provide ample food to feed 5,000 men, but don't forget that the text says *“those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.”* It is not unrealistic to think that Jesus fed as many as 15,000-20,000 people! That is what the Lord can do. He can give plenty. He can give in abundance. He did it at the wedding in Cana, when He provided 180 gallons of the finest of wines. The Lord did it in the wilderness when He provided the manna daily for the people. There is an old legend that speaks of the young boy who gave his loaves and fishes to Jesus, who used them to feed the multitude. As he shared the news of what happened with his family, he asked, “I wonder if it would be the same with everything we give to Him?!”

So often when we speak of this miracle, we focus on *what* Jesus did. What He did was truly miraculous. Yet there is also the reason *why* Jesus did this great miracle. The why is found in those simple words, *When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them*. It is the love that the Lord has for all people that moves Him to do what needs to be done.

But let's set the scene. Our text says: ***"Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself."*** What Jesus had heard is that his cousin, John had been brutally murdered by Herod at the whim of a dancing girl. We don't hear much about the early relationship between John and Jesus, but they were relatives. I think it is safe to say they were friends. Since the ministry of John was totally tied into the ministry of Jesus, we can assume they had talked about their mutual work. Jesus wanted John to baptize him. It shouldn't surprise us that when Jesus heard that John had been senselessly beheaded, Jesus wanted time alone. That is why He sailed across the Sea of Tiberias to a place of solitude.

But the crowds followed Him, some even arriving before Jesus. When the Lord sees them He sets aside His own needs to respond to the needs of the people. It was a hectic, busy day and the crowd stayed until late in the day. In that desolate place there were no restaurants or stores. The people probably didn't think about being out so late. That is why the disciples want Jesus to send the crowds away. These people need to eat! Yet even here, Jesus has compassion. Jesus says to His disciples: ***"They need not go away; you give them something to eat."*** This panics the disciples, and the other gospel writers note that they wonder, ***"Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?"*** (Mark 6:37, ESV) John, in His gospel notes that Jesus already knew what He was going to do. ***He looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over.***

The Lord provides, because He cares. The Lord has compassion on us in our needs. In our VBS this summer, we talked about God's love—His love for Nicodemus, who realized his need for salvation and who found that need met by the Saviour who loved the world and died for the sins of all. We heard about Jesus' compassion for the woman at the well, who was thirsting for love and affection, but who found the best love in Christ. We heard of His love and compassion for a sinful woman who was despised by so many who thought themselves better than her, and His compassion for Zacchaeus, hated by so many because he was a tax collector working for the Roman government. Finally we heard of His compassionate love for the thief on the cross; a man who knows he is suffering the just consequences of his sins, but who cries out in faith, ***"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*** Our compassionate Lord assures this suffering, dying man: ***"Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."*** (Luke 23:42–43, ESV)

My dear people, loved by God, that Saviour who provided for the crowds that day is the same Lord who has compassion on you in your needs. We have our needs for healing, for help, for counsel. We may not always see it, but God is providing for those needs. But our greatest need is for the forgiveness that only the Saviour can bring. Without that forgiveness we are left without hope. Without that forgiveness, we would suffer forever in the torments of hell. Thankfully, our Lord has provided for our needs, freely and without any cost to us. That is why our compassionate Saviour calls to us through the words of Isaiah: ***"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David."*** (Isaiah 55:1–3, ESV)

When Jesus was tempted by the devil after His baptism, the devil urged Jesus to prove He was God by turning stones into bread. It was a very real need, even more dire a need than that of the people in our text today. Jesus answered the temptation, saying: ***"It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*** (Matthew 4:4, ESV) Food, water and the necessities of life are exactly that—necessities. God provides for our needs. But our greatest need is for His deliverance, as Christ comes to save us. He will reach out in compassion, not just to 5,000 or 50,000, but to the whole world. His compassion will result in His suffering the cruel torment of the cross, the mocking of the crowds, the whipping and the crown of thorns. His compassion will lead Him to bear the whole burden of your sin and my sin as He is forsaken by His Father. He will die, but He does it because of His love for you and me and all people. He will provide what we need, including the abundance of the life we have in Him through His resurrection from the dead. He will always do what we need and more, although He may not do it in the way we expect. Yet in all things, we can be sure of this: we have a compassionate Saviour, who knows our needs and who is ready, willing and eager to show us that compassion at all times. Amen.