

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost, August 3, 2008, Year A, Proper 13

**St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector

Scripture: Matthew 14: 13-21

**"Jesus – Compassionate Healer"**

Imagine, if you will, that you are busy at work, or doing whatever you would normally do on any regular day, absolutely swamped, when the news comes to you that someone very close to you has been killed – tortured in an inhumane way. Try to envision the emotions that you would be filled with – running the gamut from anger, to sadness, to pain, despair, loss, grief, and even rage. I rather imagine that the list could be endless. Now just think of being miles away from that loved one, unable to have reached them, to say goodbye – and your feeling totally helpless! Well, I would venture to say that would get your attention today; Right? How on earth would you possibly continue to work; to even focus? Indeed, how on earth would you continue to just function at all?

**Seeking Solitude**

That, my friends, is exactly where Jesus was at the beginning of today's Gospel reading! He had just received the news that King Herod had killed His cousin, John the Baptist. Not just killed, but brutally beheaded, because "*the daughter of Herodias danced... and pleased Herod.*" (Matthew 14:6) The king promised her whatever she wanted, and prompted by her mother, she demanded: "*Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.*" (Matthew 14:8) Can you now have a deeper image of what Jesus might have been feeling as He sought some solitude, only to be followed by the crowds of people? I can see the situation, but I cannot possibly imagine how Jesus, except to say that He is God, dealt with all of this! The desire for solace and peace must have been incredibly great.

In fact in today's Gospel message Matthew tells us that Jesus sought that solitude by withdrawing "*in a boat, to a lonely place by Himself; and when the multitudes heard of this, they followed Him on foot from the cities.*" (Matthew 14:13) Put yourself in Jesus' place, if you can. He had nowhere to run, nowhere to hide – and not a moments rest. How did Jesus deal with this? The Gospel tells us that "*When He went ashore, He saw a great multitude, and felt compassion for them, and healed their sick.*" (Matthew 14:14) Did you hear what Jesus did? **He felt compassion for them and healed their sick.** Just the thought of that grabs a hold of me and makes me sit up and take notice. **Jesus' feeling compassion for them is a remarkable phrase and carries an awful lot of truth with it.** This word **COMPASSION** certainly intrigues me – which, I believe reveals a great deal about the nature and character of Jesus Christ; about the nature and character of Almighty God!

The Greek term used to represent compassion: *σπλαγχνίζομαι* (splanchnizomai) is related to one's inner parts – one's deepest place, meaning their center for personal feelings and emotions. To put it plainly – a feeling in your gut that is aroused by another's suffering or pain. Compassion is not just feeling for someone but wanting to help relieve that pain or suffering. It is indeed evident to me that a significant aspect of Jesus' ministry was **His active compassion toward the suffering**. Please DO NOT CONFUSE compassion with pity – which is just feeling sorry for someone – and may even involve a condescending looking down upon someone.

I was told this story about a man who fell into a pit and couldn't get himself out.

- A Christian Scientist came along and said, "You only think that you are in a pit."
- A Pharisee then said, "Only bad people fall into a pit."
- A Fundamentalist said, "You deserve your pit."

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- A Charismatic said, "Just confess that you're not in a pit."
- A Methodist came by and said, "We brought you some food and clothing while you're in the pit."
- A Presbyterian said, "This was no accident, you know this was predestined!"
- An Episcopalian said: "Pit, what Pit?"
- An Optimist said, "Things will get better."
- A Pessimist said, "Things will get worse!"
- Then, Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit.

How much like the parable of the Good Samaritan this story is! While others have their excuses – Christ never seeks an excuse, instead He comes alongside and rescues us, reaching out with a love that is like no other!

### **The Compassion of Jesus**

We see example after example in the Gospels of Jesus' compassion. The incredible compassion of Jesus Christ is exhibited in miracle after miracle. I am not just talking about feeding of the multitudes from five loaves and two fish, which is mind boggling in and of itself but there are others marvelous examples of His compassion and love.

- In Matthew 9:12-13 Jesus declared "*It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*"
- The two blind men on the road from Jericho who called out to Jesus: "*Lord, we want our eyes to be opened. And moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed Him.*" (Matthew 20:33-34)
- The man with leprosy who fell to his knees pleading for mercy, and saying to Jesus: "*If You are willing, You can make me clean.*" And moved with compassion, He stretched out His hand, and touched him, and said to him, "*I am willing; be cleansed.*" And immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed." (Mark 1:40-42)
- When Jesus went into the city of Nain and saw the dead son of the widow being carried out and the pain that the woman was in; "*when the Lord saw her, He felt compassion for her, and said to her, 'Do not weep.'*" And He came up and touched the coffin; and the bearers came to a halt. And He said, "*Young man, I say to you, arise!*" And the dead man sat up, and began to speak. And Jesus gave him back to his mother." (Luke 7:13-15)

Jesus' teaching exhibited that compassion as well. In both the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son – compassion was at the heart of His message; one in healing physically and the other in the healing of relationship; emotionally, and spiritually. Both of these are prime examples that we need to pay attention to - in understanding more about who Jesus is – and what He desires from us.

I want to suggest to you that one of the greatest examples of God's awesome compassion and love for humanity lies in **the miracle of the Incarnation**. Jesus, the Son of God came into the world; God Himself stepped into history and took on human form – He took on flesh! No one understands better than Jesus of Nazareth what it means to be human, to be susceptible to

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temptation and death. Please listen to these words from the Gospel of John; you know them – say them with me if you wish: “*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him.*” (John 3:16-17)

Jesus Christ coming into the world demonstrates the most absolutely incredible show of compassion of all –

- taking our punishment upon Himself;
- taking our place;
- paying the price for our sins.

He didn't stand by and let us figure it out for ourselves – but instead Jesus felt from the depths of His being - the compassion and love that knows no limit –

- and by His stripes,
- His scourging,
- and His wounds –
- His very death –
- “*we are healed.*” (Isaiah 53:5)

No one can possibly know the agony that Jesus went through – and thanks be to God - because we have faith in Him and His forgiveness – we never will!

Sometimes we can get so caught up in our own situation that we turn a blind eye to the situation of others completely. Years ago, before fathers were allowed in the delivery rooms, a young *father-to-be* was pacing back and forth, nervously wringing his hands in the hospital waiting room while his wife was in labor. Finally, a nurse opened the door and said, "Well, sir, you have a little girl!" He heaved a sigh of relief and said, "Thank God it's a girl. She'll never have to go through the agony that I've gone through tonight!" **He was only concerned with his labor pains!**

In today's Gospel, Jesus, after healing the sick, told His disciples that the people did not need to leave Him, but instead He asked the disciples to give the people something to eat. His deep compassion for their need meant taking all that could be found – five loaves and two fish – (I find it significant that five and two total seven – the perfect divine number) – He blessed and broke them and then told the disciples to distribute the pieces among those present. Before their very eyes what had been blessed and broken - filled and satisfied a huge number of people. Look at the enormity – **five thousand MEN**, but then there were women and children too! If you had 5,000 families of three there that day– that would mean **fifteen thousand mouths to feed!** We worked hard to feed 400 at Rock, Rods, and Relationships – but could you imagine fifteen thousand or more? It doesn't end there – the five loaves and two fish produced twelve baskets of leftovers! There is a rich meaning: think about it - twelve disciples – twelve tribes of Israel, twelve baskets of leftovers.

### **Comfort in Jesus**

At the beginning of our Gospel lesson we see Jesus seeking solitude but finding only people in need. I want to suggest to you that at the end of Jesus' life on earth - it was He who might have needed the company of people – but instead was alone, forsaken, left alone to hang on the hard wood of the cross. When the crowds were in need they wouldn't leave Him alone, but when He was in trouble – only a handful stood by mercifully weeping. This is indeed significant, because

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when it is our darkest hour – Christ stands with us: to love and support us, to stand in the gap with us, to “*not leave us or forsake us.*” (1 Kings 8:57) **God Incarnate knows better than anyone what it means to be human, to endure hardship and hunger, temptation, and pain – and He stands with us:**

- When feel alone;
- when we feel forsaken;
- when we are hurting;
- when the enemy is taunting us with whatever is our weakness;
- Jesus is with us – and will help us through – if we let Him!

His shoulders are much broader than ours, and He doesn’t want us to carry any burden alone. Jesus wants us to invite Him to walk with us, to take the load and lighten ours.

Several weeks ago, Fr. Molison preached about the yoke and the oxen – and I want to repeat that verse which indeed reveals much about the compassion of our Lord Jesus. Jesus said: “*Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light.*” (Matthew 11:28-30)

When times seem dark, when we are filled with distress or mourning, grief or pain, give it to Jesus and feel His compassion and love – which know no limits. He will not tell you to leave; He offers Himself to you; He offers healing – emotionally, physically, and spiritually. He will help you to endure – in and through His compassion and love. The author of Hebrews reminds us of Christ’s compassionate love: “*For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*” (Hebrews 2:17-18) **We can take great comfort in those words – and take great comfort in Jesus.**

I am reminded of these words given to us by James, the brother of Jesus, in his epistle: “*Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.*” (James 5:11) My brothers and sisters in Christ - accept His compassion, mercy and love today. It is a free gift that Jesus offers to you – we only need to accept it, along with His great love.

In closing, I would like to leave you with these extraordinary words of comfort and prayer from the Apostle Peter, which in themselves are a great witness to the awesome compassion and love of Almighty God: “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.*” (1 Peter 1:3-9) **Amen.**