

Compassion Without Limits

I'd like to start with a shout out to Katie Couric, the television news personality. Maybe you saw the article about her in last Sunday's *Parade* magazine. Since *Parade* is a Sunday newspaper feature, in stories about celebrities there's often a question, "How do you like to spend your Sundays?"

And most often, the celebrity will say something about sleeping in, having a nice breakfast, reading the *Sunday Times*, or spending time with family. But Katie Couric answered, for all the world to hear, "I like to go to church when I can and be in a community of people who are taking an hour out of their busy lives and thinking of something bigger than themselves." (*Parade*, Oct 13, 2019, p. 12)

Wow! She gets it!

I think most of us here would agree. We are in church, together, to think of something bigger than our own little selves. We're here to think about God, about the world God loves, and about people we don't even know but God does. What a concept! Yay, Katie!

We're here to learn and live God's love, together. And for a few Sundays, we are focusing on the dimension of God's love we call compassion. So today we hear the story of the feeding of the 4000 with seven loaves of bread and a few small fish.

Wait a minute, you might be thinking. I thought it was 5000 people. I thought it was 5 loaves, and 2 fish. Did Mark, the gospel writer, make a mistake, or could there be a typo in our Bibles?

It could happen. One of the Bibles I consulted this week had a typo in this story, the word "set" instead of "sent." But in this story, the numbers are quite intentional. This is a second story of a miraculous feeding in Mark's gospel. Your memory was correct in recalling the 5000. This story is set in a different place, with a different number of people and a different number of loaves and fishes.

The explanation lies in the preceding verses, which tell the geography of this event. Jesus and his disciples have traveled across the Sea of Galilee to the predominantly Gentile east side. The numbers relate to symbolism regarding the non-Jewish world. Instead of five thousand, which would remind the Hebrew people of the five books of the Law, there are four thousand, a reminder of the four corners of the universe, as understood in the ancient world. In addition, Jewish law gave four laws that Gentiles were expected to keep when living in a Jewish community. Then there is the number 7. In the prehistory of Genesis, before the distinction was drawn between Jews and Gentiles, God gave Noah 7 laws. Deuteronomy names 7 nations of Canaan. Scholar William Placher says, "For first century readers, fascinated by number symbolism, this passage would have cried out, 'This time Jesus is feeding *Gentiles*.'" (*Mark*, 2010, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 109)

Among all the wonderful truths in this beautiful story is this: Jesus' compassion is not bound by race or tribe or religious heritage. Jesus' compassion is for all the world. In the first century church which Mark was addressing, the central debate about who was included and who was not concerned Gentile and Jewish Christians. In this 21st century world in which we live, questions of inclusion swirl all around us. Does Jesus draw lines? No, this story is showing us. His compassion invites everyone to the table of God's abundant love. This is a story of justice and compassion, a story of divine love.

In our world, where compassion is sometimes seen as weakness, this story gives a very different message. The God we worship is a compassionate god. In our world, we sometimes hear of "compassion fatigue," and maybe we've experienced it. When we see homeless on our streets, learn of children in foster care due to the addictions of parents, watch people in Japan struggle to escape tornados, typhoons, and floods, and see Kurdish families fleeing their homeland because of war—all in one week--our compassion can feel depleted. We might choose to turn aside, and escape into simply taking care of our own.

But the God we worship is a compassionate God, and we are here to take an hour out of our busy lives to think of something bigger than ourselves. Compassion means allowing our hearts to be broken by the suffering of others, being willing to feel what others are feeling, and stepping into their experiences, even with fear and trembling. It's our way of imitating Christ, who "though he was in the form of God, emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." (Phil 2:6-7)

And in his life on earth, Jesus Christ demonstrated time and again how Godly compassion can be translated into human action. In his teaching of first century disciples, he called disciples of all the centuries which have followed to compassionate living. In his ministry, he gave us our ministry: to feed the hungry, shelter the poor, heal the sick, and share the good news that God is love.

Feeding the hungry is not an optional activity for Christians. It is a mandate, central to who we are.

It was only 14 years ago that two political leaders of the 20th century collaborated on a book entitled *Ending Hunger Now*. Senator George McGovern was the Democratic Party's candidate for U.S. president in 1968. Senator Bob Dole was the Republican Party's candidate for U.S. President in 1988. In the Senate, they worked together on many food-related initiatives. Alleviating hunger does not need to be politicized! Their 2005 book was written as a challenge to persons of faith to end world hunger by the year 2030. Interestingly, the United Nations has adopted the same target date for its Sustainable Development Goal of "No Hunger."

Because right now, there is enough food to feed the world's population. But people are hungry because of poverty, conflict, and extreme weather events. People are hungry because we waste 40% of the world's food. People are hungry because we lack the vision and the will to address these systemic problems. Dramatic improvements in lifting people out of extreme poverty have taken place in recent decades. We could finish the job. Conflicts both cause and are caused by hunger. We must help build peace in the world. Extreme weather events are on the rise due to climate change. We need to rise above the politicization of this reality and work together to protect the earth which gives us food to eat.

We're not very different from those first century disciples who, even though they had been part of the miraculous feeding of 5000, could not see a solution to feeding 4000. They asked Jesus, "How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?" Without faith, we sink into despair. But with faith, we can join God, banish excuses, and end the apathy which is the opposite of compassion.

As Bart Campolo of the urban ministry program "Mission Year" writes, "All we lack to end hunger are the moral conviction and the political will to do so." (<https://fortresspress.com/product/ending-hunger-now-challenge-persons-faith>) Moral conviction arises from obedience to the one in whom we put our faith. Jesus tells us to feed the hungry.

This afternoon, dozens of people in our community will demonstrate their commitment to feeding the hungry by walking together on the annual CROP Walk. It's still possible to join that united effort through a donation or by putting on your hiking shoes and showing up at the Food Bank at 1:30. Are you aware that our community's Food Bank provides "emergency" food assistance to over 3000 people every month? The "emergency" for most of them is called inadequate wages to cover expenses. There are systemic problems which we need to address through legislation and education. As a church, we show our concern by making the first Sunday of every month "Food Bank Sunday," bringing food to church as part of our offering. We could also be taking a hard look at where our food comes from and how it is grown, as we learned last Wednesday evening in our "Courageous Conversation" series. Or you could Google "World Food Day" for more ideas of how we can turn Christ-like compassion into action and truly eliminate hunger in our community and in our world. For it is God's world, and Jesus shows us that we can feed the hungry even when it seems impossible.

The renowned preacher and activist of the late 20th century, William Sloane Coffin, once wrote an essay entitled, "Why haven't we done more already?" In it, he wrote,

Socrates had it wrong: it's finally not the unexamined but the uncommitted life that is not worth living. Descartes was also mistaken: "Cogito, ergo sum?" (I think, therefore I am.) Nonsense, "Amo, ergo sum" (I love, therefore I am.) There are no smaller packages in this world than people all wrapped up in themselves. St. Paul had it right: if we fail in love, we fail in all things else.

(The Living Pulpit, Jan.-Mar. 2007, p. 24)

Jesus asks us to open our hearts in compassion, and open our lives in action. Will we respond, and feed all God's children?