As One with Compassion | Matthew 14:13-33

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Stories that are yoked, that are bound together in time and text. Stories that are often told individually - as hallmarks of our children’s Sunday School lessons - as images of Christ permanently painted in our mind’s eye. But today, today we hear them as they were written - back-to-back - as one continuous display of Christ’s compassionate love - a love that kept pouring out until all were filled.

We hear it begin that Jesus withdrew by way of a boat but the crowds followed him, growing in number. We hear it begin here but it began before this moment. Does anyone know what story precedes ours from this morning’s reading? If you will, open your bibles to Matthew 14 - its page ___ in the pew Bible. Take a look at the first part of chapter 14.

Jesus withdrew because Jesus was grieving. Would you not want to be alone if your friend, if your cousin had just been murdered at the “whim of a dancing girl” at a party? John the Baptist was Jesus’ “prophet, the man who had baptized him and who had devoted his whole life to preparing the way. And worse than that, he had lost him to murder, a vivid reminder to Jesus and everyone else that God’s prophets were not immune to death, that if anything they were more likely to die violently than quietly, and sooner than later.”¹

And so this is where we meet our Lord - he gets in a boat, an all alone, deserted place, a place where he can be - be knee-deep in the ashes of John’s death and in the reminder that his own end was to come with violence fire started by fear. While he sails along, crowds gather and travel parallel on the shore. When he lands, the crowds clamor for him, eager for the good news as an antidote to such bad, such horrible news.

Verse 14 is perhaps the most poignant to me in our reading. Listen again: When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

Out of the boat, heavy with grief, Jesus looks up - perhaps through weary, tear-filled eyes, and he sees the crowds.

My friend Carrie has what I describe as Jesus-eyes - they’re round and light and look nothing like Jesus’ brown eyes but I promise you, they are Jesus-eyes. She can look at someone - a complete stranger - and

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, The Problem with Miracles sermon
see their pain, see the things they carry, the story hidden by layered years of self-preservation. Carrie looks at people and the shield that surrounds them shatters. They feel free and known and loved all because of the way Carrie **looks** at them. It sounds like a super power but that wouldn’t give it the gravitas it deserves. The way Carrie looks at people is how Jesus looked at that crowd - it is the look of love lived out - it is the look of recognizing pain even in the midst of one’s own grief - it is the look of moving towards one another in all manner of whatever else is happening - it is **compassion**. And it is nothing short of holy.

It is nothing short of holy when Jesus sees the crowds, either. Jesus sees the crowds and the text tells us that **he had compassion for them and - so - cured their sick.** This is perhaps the beginning of the miracles in this extended story because it is extraordinary, beyond what is expected, how can it be and yet here it is Good News. Good News that breaks in even though the darkness gathers round. The Greek word used here is one of the only Greek words I know - σπλαγχνίζομαι - splagchnizomai - which our English translates as compassion but means “to be moved in the seat of affection - in the pit and center of one’s body.” Compassion does not stay sealed in the confines of one’s body but **moves.** Compassion can’t stay put. And neither can Jesus.

Moving through the crowds, he laid his hands on those others dare not touch. He heard their list of ailments and instead of saying “well - I’m not a doctor...this isn’t the right place...I do not have time/energy/resources...” he said, “Yes.” We do not know how many were sick and in need of curing but the crowd was a crowd and people are people and is there not one among us who does not need a little curing?

It must have taken some time to cure all those folks because night began to fall and as the stars illuminated his work, the disciples began to get itchy and worrisome. We do that, don’t we, when we see a need so great and wonder how on earth it will be fulfilled? So in their itchy, worrisome way, the disciples come up to Jesus and daresay, “This place is deserted, Jesus. Do you see it? It is desolate and without. Send these folks away and tell them to go get their own food in the village.” Jesus looks at his disciples and although the text does not say it, I imagine his seat of affection reached out as he said, “They’re fine right where they are, my loves. You are the ones to feed them.” The disciples must’ve known he was going to say and already counted their meal options between them this because the text says **they** replied - as one body, one voice - “Well, Lord, here’s the thing: we don’t have enough.”

*Bring them to me.* Bring them so I can be closer. Bring them so I can look at them face-to-face. Bring them because compassion can’t stay put.

The story of feeding not only 5,000 because remember the children and women were too much of an effort to be counted - the feeding of far more than 5,000 commences and then verse 22 reads “Immediately, he made the disciples get into the boat” - his still possibly tear-stained from grief boat -
“and go ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he dismissed the crowds, he went up to the mountain by himself to pray.” Because perhaps he wasn’t done grieving yet. Because losing a loved one is not a switch we can turn off and on when it suits us. Because moving towards others requires that we move ever more towards God. Because Jesus knew the rhythm of caring for others ebbs and flows and fills us and empties us.

You know this part of the story, too. The disciples awoke to Jesus walking across the sea towards them and it scared them so that they began to scream about ghosts. But compassion can’t stay put so Jesus moves closer and closer and calls across the water to them, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Not enough for dear Peter, he takes a gamble and says, “Ok, fine. If it is you, tell me to come out to you.” And Jesus says, “Come.” But getting that close to compassion can make one itchy and worrisome and in Peter’s case, doubtful, because why would anyone pour out so much love for me and so Peter wobbles a bit and begins to sink. And what does Jesus do? The text says, “Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him.” Because - compassion can’t stay put.

As Presbyterian Christians, we order our covenant life through a yoked document - of the Book of Confessions - the words of our ancestors bound in statements of faith - and in the Book of Order - the way we are called to live our lives through being church together. Why - some of you might be wondering - is she bringing this up now when we were getting all gushy on Jesus? 1. I am a decent and orderly Presbyterian so there’s always time for it and 2. Because our yoked constitution comes from the story of faith and these stories of Jesus are not only words written upon our hearts but are words written on the seats of our affection - on the very center of our bodies - these are words meant to move us towards one another. And it just so happens that the Book of Order invites us to consider compassion as one of the hallmarks of our life together.

This comes from our Directory of Worship but - as I said - comes from Jesus’ own life:

“God sends the Church to show compassion in the world: feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, visiting prisoners, freeing captives, sheltering the homeless, welcoming strangers, comforting those who mourn, and being present with all who are in need. These acts of compassion, done corporately or individually, are the work of the Church as the body of Christ. We are called to minister directly to people’s immediate hurts and needs.

Following the example of Jesus Christ, we pledge that we will respect the dignity of all, reach out to those judged undeserving, receive as well as give, and even risk our lives to show Christ’s love.”

We are called to minister directly to people’s immediate hurts and needs. When one among us knows how dark night can get. When one among us lives by a calendar of appointments, pills, and procedures.
When one among us feels stifled in a job or in the constant search for a job.
When one among us cannot recall the sound of a loved one’s voice, it has been so long.
When one among us carries the weight of addiction, abuse, mental illness.
When one among us fears death.
When one among us needs someone who will move toward them.

Jesus’ first move is always towards us - through his birth, through his ministry - through curing the sick and bringing them together for a feast and grabbing their hand as they sink, at the last meal with his disciples, hanging on the cross and forgiving those who hung beside him, appearing to Mary and Mary at the tomb, ignoring locked doors and greeting his beloved on the road - Jesus’ first move is always toward us. In pain, in his own grief, in his need for prayerful silent time with God, he still moves towards us. Because compassion can’t stay put. Compassion knows the depth of pain and suffering and ye, even death, and says, “Bring them here to me.”

May we be as ones with compassion, ever in awe that we are those among the crowds. Amen.