Sermon

August 2, 2020

“To Suffer With”

Matthew 14:13-21

The account of the feeding of the five thousand in Matthew has been an inspiration to Christians in many diverse situations. It occurs immediately after Jesus and the disciples learn of the brutal murder of John the Baptist and after a long day with large and desperate crowds. The disciples were really hoping to get away. They were grieving and tired. So the disciples tell everyone else to go away. Wouldn’t we have done so in that situation?

But the story then tells us that Jesus had compassion and he invited all of the people to stay and eat. Compassion is a word we toss out a lot, but I don’t think we look long at the deep root of the word and what it means. Compassion means “to suffer with”. In our story today, for Jesus to “have compassion” means that he not only saw what the people needed, he truly understood the depth of the state they were in. He “suffered with them”. Because of this, he was able to get past his own immediate needs and act on behalf of the multitude gathered there that day. Gathered there because of him.

To say that the disciples were shocked by Jesus’ actions would be a HUGE understatement. Not only were they hoping to tend to their own needs, they knew that there were no resources to provide what Jesus had just invited. When they gathered together their two fish and five loaves, they really believed that Jesus would see the error of his ways. But, Jesus told them to feed the people anyway. The disciples were in for a big surprise that evening at the miraculous power of God’s love.

This is the only miracle story found in all four Gospels. It was obviously very important to the early church. Scholars believe that this story was treasured by the church because it taught Christians the very heart of the gospel message and was a deep source of hope for Christians who were seeking to be faithful against great odds.

First, this story teaches us that God is love. The key to this story is that Jesus had compassion. In spite of consistent, incredible pressures to behave to the contrary, compassion for all the people was his foremost motivation. It is not compassion in the abstract, as I referred to earlier. It is truly suffering with – and caring deeply about the most basic needs of all the people – of all of US. In this case, it was food, but it also includes other needs – freedom from oppression, freedom from discrimination…

The second lesson from this story is about being disciples – about the incredible responsibility that God has entrusted to us. Jesus did not feed the five thousand. He told the disciples to do it. God has entrusted us to be the body of Christ in the world. God does not work alone, but through people just like you and me. To follow Jesus is to express our *concrete* acts of love, justice, and compassion toward others. It is no accident that the Gospel of Matthew tells us we will meet Jesus in the “least of these” – the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned.

Finally, this story reminds us that when we need it most, God will give us the power to work for good in the world. This is important to remember when we find ourselves faced with great odds – not in our favor – but stacked against us. We often look at these situations – and the incredible odds – and think it’s impossible – just as the original disciples did in our story today. We feel powerless. But, when we think and believe this way, we are only looking at ourselves. We are not in touch with the power of the Holy Spirit present with us all – this power means if we join together and follow Jesus, “all things are possible with God”. Are they not?

We also feel powerless because we use this very human lens to “examine” the suffering in our world – the enormity of it – and the dwindling resources available to address it. We seldom look at the injustice in our world through real compassion – “suffering with”. As it happens to anyone in this, God’s amazing creation, it is happening to you and me. It is this that should motivate us – that each and every life is precious in God’s eyes, and when things are not right, we must do something about it.

How often has Jesus called to us to say: “You give them something to eat,” or “You break the bars of those prisons, “ or “You dismantle the powers that be that hold my people in oppression” and we have turned away, because we feel powerless? We feel we have “nothing” in our baskets, because we only see two fish and five loaves. When we believe this way, the possibilities for acting in compassion, for truly changing anything, are going to be small. If we believe we have nothing, Jesus then has “nothing” with which to feed the hungry. Yes, Jesus transforms us and our offerings into something bigger, but Jesus is also asking – no, calling – us to dream bigger. Jesus did not say: “Give me that bread and those fish and I will feed them”. His first call was for the disciples to change their ideas about their own power in the world.

Today’s story seems very familiar. But, it’s message can be new for us each day.

* God loves and cares for every person on earth – in fact, “suffers with them”. God’s promise of fullness of life extends to every creature and creation itself.
* God calls us to be disciples – the kind of disciples through which God’s work is done in the world – even the sorely troubled world we are in today.
* God promises us in the Holy Spirit that the power of God’s love can break through even in the most unlikely places when we join together to seek God’s best intentions for our world – when we, too “suffer with”

This story is truly miraculous as it is. But what might have happened, had the disciples seen the crowd’s suffering as their own? What might have happened had they taken the bread, looked to heaven, blessed and broke the bread? What might happen if we join together, knowing the world’s problems are our own, remember God’s promise that love can handle it all, and use our God-given power in this place to make a difference? What if we today, in this meeting for worship, truly center down, and call on the Spirit to infuse us with all this love and power – and so change the world?