**Sabbath for Compassion**

**February 23, 2025**

Mark 6: 45-52 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Mark 8:11-14

The news and realities in the world these days can be overwhelming. There is so much going on that it is hard to feel hopeful or even keep up on the latest news, whether it is from the new US President, or the wars and violence elsewhere, or dealing with the cold here or seeing the extreme climate in parts of the world. This past month has been a barrage of executive orders from President Trump, over 70 of them, many having significant implications for the US government structure, institutions and as we know, some having significant challenges for us as Canadians. Even if you know of only a few of these, it can still be overwhelming and we may feel a wide mix of feelings.

Jesus was probably overwhelmed by all that was happening for him, in our reading today. Before this reading he has just fed 5000 people who did not have enough food. Before that he and his disciples were trying to get away to ‘a deserted place’ where they could rest, but the crowd followed him and arrived ahead of him. The disciples had just returned from their first mission, were exhausted and exhilarated and had much to tell Jesus. Jesus was grieving, having heard that his cousin, John the Baptist had been violently killed at a feast of Herod’s. A reminder of the risk he too is under. So, they try to get away, but first, after the people follow him, he is filled with compassion and feeds them. As soon is that is done, they do get away, he sends the disciples away in the boat to the other side, while he goes off up the mountain to pray. He needed to rest, nourish his spirit, replenish his energy for the continued ministry ahead. This time was important and essential in Jesus’ ministry. He often took time away to pray, and usually did not wait until everyone was properly cared for or healed but would slip away and take the time he needed, so he could be present to those who needed him.

According to Wayne Muller’s book [Sabbath](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/504541.Sabbath), Finding Rest, Renewal And Delight In Our Busy Lives, one translation of to pray, is ‘to come to rest’. When Jesus prayed, he was coming to rest, going to a quiet place to nourish his spirit and deepen his connection with God, by being quiet with God. Jesus models the importance of sabbath for our lives, especially in our busyness, and the stress of all that we deal with. Muller writes:

“The practice of Shabbat, or Sabbath, is designed specifically to restore us, a gift of time in which we allow the cares and concerns of the marketplace to fall away. We set aside time to delight in being alive, to savor the gifts of creation and to give thanks for the blessings we may have missed in our necessary preoccupation with our work. Ancient texts suggest we light candles, sing songs, pray, tell stories, worship, eat, nap and make love. It is a day of delight, a sanctuary in time. Within this sanctuary, we make ourselves available to the insights and blessings that arise only in stillness and time.”

How do you practice Sabbath? Practicing sabbath is an important reminder for us today as we may find it difficult to make this kind of time for rest and renewal. Jesus ensured he got it, even if it meant other things not getting done or people not being taken care of, for he knew he could better take care of them after the time of prayer, of rest.

In today’s story, once renewed, after taking the night to pray, Jesus comes to the shore early in the morning and finds the disciples in the boat out at sea, struggling in a storm. He goes out toward them, walking on the water. Then the passage tells us what I find to be a strange thing: it says “He intended to pass them by”. Sometimes when reading scripture, I come across a sentence that stands out for me, that strikes me as odd, interesting or puzzling. To me this one is quite puzzling. Why would he want to pass them by? Why go out there if not to go to them? I wonder if he was wanting to avoid what happened – the disciples being scared of him by this act. I wonder if he knew they wouldn’t understand, and just wanted to pass by quietly to calm the sea for them and join them later. Mark’s gospel is written in a way to communicate Jesus doesn’t want anyone to know yet that he is the Messiah, so maybe he wanted to avoid the disciples getting a clue of this yet. But they saw him and it was too late. However, they did not understand. They were still confused about the feeding of the 5000 and how that happened and this just added another thing to confound them. This is what is meant when it says their hearts were hardened. It meant they didn’t understand, not that they couldn’t, it was just too much for them. They missed the sign. The sign of God’s presence with them, of the love, compassion and power that was with them. How often do we miss the signs of God’s presence with us?

The disciples had just experienced Jesus’ compassion. Despite his exhaustion and grief, Jesus felt compassion for the hungry crowd, seeing that they were like a sheep without a shepherd. His love and compassion from deep within was stirred in him. We are reading [Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul](https://www.earthandsoul.org/sacred-earth-sacred-soul) in our Open Minds, Open Hearts, Open Books study at Eastside, thanks to Dexter’s recommendation. The second chapter talks about Celtic teacher Pelagius. One of his teachings is the sacredness of compassion. He taught “that it is not so much what you believe about Jesus that matters. The important thing is becoming like Jesus, becoming compassionate. A Christ-one, he said, is one ‘who shows compassion to all, . . . who feels another’s pain as if it were his own, and who is moved to tears by the tears of others’”. It is an innate, gut feeling that we all have, that is part of loving God and one another.

This kind of love and compassion Jesus showed would be in great contrast to the behaviour described earlier in the chapter of Herod’s feast, where gluttony, greed, entitlement and violence were all on display. Some might say we are witnessing a similar kind of display in the leadership of the US government these days as they cut programs that help the poor and marginalized in order to get more money, supposedly for the government and the people. As they threaten other countries with tariffs and takeovers. As they raid churches, schools and many places to root out immigrants for deportation. Contrast this with the love and compassion Jesus exemplified and calls us to. The actions of the executive order on deportations of so called illegal immigrants are actually hindering many churches and religious organizations from carrying out their mission and ministry. It is infringing on their religious freedoms. And so over two dozen Christian and Jewish religious denominations and associations have filed a [lawsuit](https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/important-good-news-faith-pushback?utm_source=substack&publication_id=47400&post_id=156933805&utm_medium=email&utm_content=share&utm_campaign=email-share&triggerShare=true&isFreemail=false&r=nzf4c&triedRedirect=true) against the Trump administration for the infringement on their religious freedoms. The suit describes not only how churches are unable to serve immigrant populations at organizations but names immigrant attendance at worship is greatly diminished due to the fear of raids at these locations, which previously were safe spaces under the Sensitive Locations Policy. Churches, synagogues and religious organizations are unable to serve their immigrant communities because of the rescinding of this policy. Thus their religious freedom is hindered. It takes courage and faith to take such a stand, and I commend the churches who have done so.

As you may feel overwhelmed with all that is going on, take time to rest. While it is important to be informed, it is also important to know when to turn off the news, the social media, the TV, and take a break, to renew your spirit in whatever way works best for you. If you know people in the US, family or friends, check in with them, because if you are feeling overwhelmed, imagine how they are feeling. Give them a call and find out. Take the sabbath time you need, so that you can be present to be loving, compassionate, patient, and caring in whatever you do in your day to day life. Know that God is with you, and seek to be a Christ-one in all you do.