

Pentecost 9 / August 2, 2020

Matthew 14:14

“When He went ashore He saw a great crowd, and He had compassion on them and healed their sick.”

What is compassion? What mental images come to mind when you hear the word, ‘compassion?’ Do you think of God? If you do, it’s because of Jesus. People don’t naturally think of God, however they conceive of Him, as being compassionate. Ancient peoples certainly didn’t think of their gods as being compassionate. The gods of the ancient Canaanites were cruel and demanding. They even demanded the sacrifice of humans. The gods of the ancient Greeks were more like humans with super powers than divine beings. They used their powers to indulge their desires and were more troublesome to humans than compassionate. The ancient world in which our gospel is set, was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. In contrast to the popular religion of mythology, Greek philosophers imagined God as being completely emotionless and absolutely detached from the pains and joys of the world. The god of the philosophers wouldn’t dirty his hands with the struggles and sorrows of human beings.

In contrast, God who revealed Himself to the Hebrews, through Moses, the Psalmists and the Prophets, was absolutely involved with the world and especially with His human creation. He is a hands on deity. God called all things into being by His powerful word, but He formed Adam from the dust of the earth and Eve from his flesh, as if He had human hands. He breathed into their nostrils the breath of life. You can’t get any more hands on, up close and personal than that! Good thing there wasn’t a pandemic! He was passionately involved with the children of Israel, to whom He joined Himself in the covenant He made through Moses.

The ancients universally conceived of the gods as distant, angry, easily offended, self-centered, cruel and demanding. God revealed Himself to Israel as loving towards His human creation and kind to all His hands had made. The philosophers conceived of god as aloof from the affairs of humans and absolutely dispassionate regarding human needs, pains and struggles. God revealed Himself to Israel as passionate and compassionate. His love for His people was His passion. His compassion was that He knew their struggles and felt their pain. He loved His children as parents love their children; forgiving their trespasses and not counting their sins against them. The psalmist sang, “As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear Him; for He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.” God’s compassion was expressed fully in Jesus, who both shared in our dust in terms of His humanity and who raises us from the dust of death through the forgiveness of His cross, on which He sacrificed Himself for our sins and the sins of the whole world. He is the image of the compassionate God, who heals us body and soul, in time and for eternity!

Jesus expresses His compassion in our gospel, by healing the sick and then by providing food for a crowd of five thousand. I wonder what people thought when they saw and received those things! Awe? Amazement? Wonder? What would they have seen in those wonders; power or compassion? I’m betting it would have been power! What a powerful man to do such thing! Matthew doesn’t describe the people’s reaction to the healings, or the feeding of the multitude. But in his gospel, John says that when the people realized the great miracle Jesus had done that they tried to seize Him and make Him king by force. They perceived Him as a kind of Genie in a bottle, who could meet all their needs. Their every wish would be His command. We naturally gravitate to power rather than to compassion.

Jesus certainly gave a powerful sign by healing the sick and feeding the five thousand, but it was a sign that showed more than His power. They were signs motivated by His compassion and they revealed not just His divine power, but also the power of His love. Everyone perceives God’s power in the things that He made. He reveals His power most kindly in compassion. As the psalmist said, “He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.” He knows and He remembers, because He loves us. Because He loves us, He took our dust upon Himself and shared in our humanity in Jesus. Because He loves us, He deals with us gently, as a loving parent cares for his or her children. Because He loves us, He does not treat us as our sins deserve. Because He loves us, He provides earthly bread to meet our physical needs and offers Himself as the heavenly bread to fill our

spiritual needs and satisfy our hunger and thirst for Him and His righteousness. He does this, because He knows our struggles and shares our sorrows. He does this, because He is filled with love and compassion for us.

The word compassion means to share in the experience and emotions of another person. A companion is a person who walks beside you on a journey. A comrade is a person who stands with you as a friend. Jesus is the companion who walks with us, as one who knows our frame from His experience of being human. Jesus is the comrade who stands beside us in all our experiences, as a friend who knows our joy and sorrows and who feels our pain. Compassion is often associated with pain, suffering and sorrow. Jesus knew the crowd was hungry, not just because it was suppertime, but because He was probably hungry Himself. His appreciation of human needs is not only intellectual, but also experiential. Isaiah said, "He was a man of sorrows and no stranger to tears." The author of Hebrews says that because the children have flesh and blood that He "shared in their humanity." His acknowledgement of our pain and His appreciation of the human condition, comes not simply from His divine intellect, but also from His experience of being human.

His compassion in providing for our physical and spiritual needs is an expression of His loving heart that yearns to embrace us in reconciliation and bless us with healing, health and forgiveness. Jesus healed the sick and fed the multitude as an expression of divine power, but it was an expression motivated by compassion. Jesus felt the hunger of the multitude, so He fed them through five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus felt the pain of the sick, so He healed them of their afflictions. Jesus feels the pain of the human spirit, so He joined us in our humanity. He suffered for our sins on the cross, because sin is the source of brokenness, pain, suffering and death. He took our place in death, so He would overcome death and provide us with healing in our relationship with God, from whom comes life and every gift in life. The power of the gospel is the power of His love. In the gospel He comes to us as our compassionate healer, body and soul!

Wouldn't it be something to see a miracle! A miracle is a display of God's power, compressed into an event at a certain time and place. A miracle is something God always does, expressed in such a way as to open our eyes to see. God expresses His power constantly and displays it daily. Each day God blesses us with healing, through the functioning of our bodies. Our bodies are built to heal themselves from cuts, wounds and believe it or not, even from viruses. God blesses us with medicines, caregivers and physicians to heal us. A miracle happens when God takes something He does daily and compacts it into one event, so that we see it clear as crystal and see that He is the One who did it.

Jesus healed the sick, so we would see that God is our healer and that Jesus is God. Jesus fed the five thousand, so we would see that God opens His hand and satisfies the desires of all things living and that Jesus is God. God feeds us each day with the bread of the earth. We see it so often, we fail to see that He is the one doing it. Jesus healed the sick and fed the multitude, so we would know that our spirits also need nourishment and healing. Jesus came to heal our souls in relationship with the Father, in whom we live and move and have our being. Jesus heals us in our relationship with the Father through the forgiveness of the cross, on which He shed His blood for our sins. Jesus heals us in His word, in the washing of our baptism and in the sacrament of Holy Communion. In and through these means of grace, He shows Himself our compassionate healer!

Do you want to see a miracle? Listen to the word of the Lord and you will see and receive the miracle of His love in Christ Jesus. He calls, "Come to the waters, everyone who thirsts...Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good and delight yourself in rich food. Incline your ear and come to me; hear that your soul may live." He comes to us full of compassion. He calls us to Himself that in Christ He may nourish our spirits and heal our wounds in the forgiveness of His cross. God bless us with ears to hear His call, eyes to see His works and faith to answer His call. In Jesus' Name. Amen