

Jesus had Compassion

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56. Year B, Proper 11; July 19, 2015

In these days of immense religious turmoil and conflict, we pause today to consider two closely related questions: How does God view the world, and how does God ask us to view the world?

Our gospel reading, you may have noticed, omits about 18 verses, which contain two miracle stories: the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus walking on the water. What ties together the two parts of Mark 6 that we have just heard read? They seem transitional, even inconsequential, compared to the miracle stories they frame. Yet the two miracle stories were not included in the Revised Common Lectionary but the surrounding passages were. Someone must have felt they were terribly important, and indeed they are. To skip over them would be to miss two closely related readings about the nature of God and our ethical duty.

Our hymns soar with tributes to the majesty and power of God:

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great Name we praise.*

Such descriptions of God tend to make us think of God as remote, uninvolved in and not particularly concerned about the day to day events of the world.

Our reading from Mark follows the return of the disciples from their first assignment, being sent out two by two to heal and to proclaim the coming kingdom of God. John the Baptist had been killed, and Jesus had just visited his home town, only to be rejected by the residents. They said they were repulsed by him, which so upset Jesus that he could not do miracles there. Yet outside of Nazareth, the people kept coming to him in such numbers that he had no time to eat. So Jesus gathered his disciples and suggested they go by boat to find a quiet place, away from the crowds, to rest.

When they went ashore, however, the people were already waiting for them. There is no rest for the weary. In a church community that feels called to serve our community and the world, the needs and demands sometimes seem overwhelming. When Jesus saw the crowds at the place he had hoped to find a brief moment of peace and quiet, he did not react with disappointment, sadness, frustration, resentment—the human emotions we would quite naturally feel—no, verse 34 says, "When Jesus arrived and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Then he began to teach them many things." In the second part of the reading, when they had crossed the lake in another effort to find rest, they again found crowds waiting for them, and Jesus healed the sick.

At eight different places the gospels say explicitly that Jesus had compassion, and, I would suggest, compassion is implicit in almost every gospel story of Jesus. Jesus, in our gospel reading, had compassion on the people, and taught them many things, and healed them.

Jesus, as the ultimate revelation of God, reflects God's view of human kind. The essence of our God is compassion. This is not an insignificant lesson. Religious history teaches us that we are much inclined to ascribe to God, and even pray for, those other attributes of power and might, judgment, wrath, anger, vengeance, retribution. But

compassion?

The great 20th century Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel says compassion, or in his terminology "divine pathos", is the essence of the God disclosed in the prophetic tradition of ancient Israel. God reveals himself in a personal and intimate relationship to the world. He does not just command and expect to be obeyed. He is moved and affected by what happens in the world. Indeed, God's compassion for the world, his willingness to be intimately involved with the history of humankind, is the essence of God's nature.

Compassion is not pity, nor is it condescension. Pity, condescension, even love, are emotions we can manage from a distance. They do not require direct involvement, and can be trivialized to become what the 20th century German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls "cheap grace." Compassion is not remote; it cannot be done at a distance. The German word for compassion is literally, "with suffering." Suffering with the people is what Jesus' comment about the people being like sheep without a shepherd suggests. God's compassion is a compassion that suffers, a feeling that comes from solidarity with those for whom God has compassion. The passion of Christ on the cross is the incarnation of the divine pathos of God the creator. Jesus' compassion for the crowd, the sheep without a shepherd, reaches its culmination on the cross at Golgotha.

If God has that sort of passion for the world and human kind, how we live our lives must be shaped by this divine compassion. As recipients of divine compassion, we would betray God's gift of compassion, and betray our own being, our new being in Christ, were we to fail to live lives of compassion in our dealings with others.

The contemporary historian of religion, Karen Armstrong, suggests that writings of religious sages, beginning about 900 years before Christ, began to depict the supreme deity as a God of compassion, a remarkably different perception of God from the image of the supreme and violent deity of earlier religious writings. Out of these new writings about a God of compassion, grew three great religions: rabbinic Judaism, Christianity and Islam, each build around the core of a compassionate God.

As followers of Christ, we must find ways to build on that common core of compassion, and to work with Islam and Judaism. We cannot let our response be one of anger and blame. We cannot hold grudges. We must take the initiative, take risks.

On NPR Friday they replayed a StoryCorps interview of a man, Oshea Israel, and a woman, Mary Johnson. When he was 16 Oshea Israel, 12 years earlier, had killed another boy in a fight at a party. Mary Johnson was that boy's mother. Learning that Oshea was about to be released, Mary Johnson took the initiative to visit him in prison. I'll read a brief part of the transcript of what the two said in their joint interview for StoryCorps:

MARY JOHNSON: *You and I met at Stillwater prison. I wanted to know if you were in the same mind set of what I remember from court, where I wanted to go over and hurt you. But you were not that 16-year-old. You were a grown man. I shared with you about my son.*

OSHEA ISRAEL: *And he became human to me, you know? When I met you, it was like, OK, this guy is real. And then, when it was time to go, you broke down and started shedding tears. And the initial thing to do was try to hold you up as best I can, just hug you like I would my own mother.*

JOHNSON: *After you left the room, I began to say it. I just hugged the man that murdered my son. And I instantly knew that all that anger and animosity, all the stuff I had in my heart for 12 years for you, I knew it was over, that I had totally forgiven*

you.

ISRAEL: As far as receiving forgiveness from you, sometimes I still don't know how to take it because I still haven't totally forgiven myself yet. It's something that I'm learning from you.

The two are now close neighbors and have forged a true friendship. Six months ago, when Ms. Johnson got married, Israel was there to walk her down the aisle. She is looking forward to attending his college graduation next year.

Forgiveness begun with risk, and forged with compassion, a willingness to suffer and heal with another.

Amen.

Dale Ramerman,
Christ Church Anacortes,
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