

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 2, 2026

Matthew 14:13-21

The Rev. David B. Hodges

Greg Boyle is a Roman Catholic priest and the founder of an organization called Homeboy Industries. Homeboy Industries works to support people who were formerly involved in gangs and previously incarcerated people, giving them a chance to redirect their lives. Since it was founded over 30 years ago, Homeboy Industries has become the largest gang rehabilitation and re-entry program in the world. *We work with a population that nobody desires to work with*, says Fr. Greg. In a book he wrote titled, Tattoos on the Heart, Greg Boyle talks about a course he taught on theological issues in American short stories to inmates in a prison. Fr. Greg says that during one of the classes he and the inmates talked about the ways in which three words are often used interchangeably, sympathy, empathy and compassion. Greg Boyle says that he asked the convicted felons to define those terms. *Well, sympathy*, one of them said, *“is when your homie’s mom dies and you go up to him and say, sorry to hear ’bout your moms.* Another inmate spoke up and said, *empathy is when your homie’s mom dies and you say, sorry bout your moms. My moms died six months ago. I feel ya, dog.*’ At that point, Fr. Greg says that he asked if anyone could define compassion, but he got no response only inmates squirming and looking at the floor. *Come on now*, Boyles said, *compassion – what’s it mean?* Finally, one of the inmates who had been sentenced to twenty-five years in prison raised a finger and as everyone in the room looked at him, he said, *well, now, compassion – that’s sumthin’ altogether different. Cause that’s what Jesus did. I mean, compassion... IS... God.*

Jesus withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick (Matthew 14:13-14). And so, begins a story of compassion, a story about Jesus. It is a story that we just listened to that is taken from the book of Matthew and it is a story that was significant enough that it is found in all four of the accounts of the life of Jesus, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. That alone should tell us something about how important this story is and why the meaning of this story about a miracle has been interpreted in a variety of ways. But no matter how this story is interpreted and no matter how many people were actually fed that day or how so many were fed with so little, we are told that this miracle story begins when Jesus responds out of compassion.

In the Gospel written by Matthew the word for compassion is only used a few times and each time it describes how Jesus felt after he saw what was going on with those around him. Each time he is portrayed as doing something to relieve someone of whatever they were going through physically or emotionally. It has been suggested that *Jesus' compassion for others is always sparked by a single observation, which is that "others" are "harassed and helpless", and we must do something to address it.* (Shively T. J. Smith, "Compassion that Moves," Day1.org. 6/12/17). In his comments about the ways in which Jesus showed compassion William Barclay points out that the Greek word used for compassion is the strongest word for pity in the Greek language. It is a word that describes a feeling that takes a person to the very depths of their being. (The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1, p. 354).

If I stopped right now and asked there would likely be several definitions of what we think compassion is and what it looks like. Some of what we might come up with would probably

involve feeling sorry for someone or just feeling for someone who is grieving or going through a hard time. It might involve feelings we have of pity for those who are desperate or in critical need. It might involve how we act out of a sense of obligation or guilt when someone is going through a difficult period in their life. But notice that in this story there is no mention of any of that is there? It doesn't say Jesus felt sorry for the crowd of people, does it? It doesn't say Jesus pitied them, does it? It doesn't say Jesus felt obligated to them, does it? No, it says that he had compassion for them.

Dr. James Doty was a neurosurgeon and the founding director of the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research at Stanford University, who became well known around the world as a champion for and a voice for compassion. As someone said, Doty didn't just talk about compassion – he lived it. He walked his talk. (Stephen Butler, Compassion Institute, 7/23/25). In some of his writing about compassion, Doty asks these questions: *Why, in a country that consumes over 25% of the world's resources is there an epidemic of loneliness, depression, and anxiety? Why do so many in the West who have all their basic needs met still feel impoverished?* Doty goes on to say, *while some politicians might answer, "it's the economy, stupid, based on scientific evidence, a better answer is, it's the lack of compassion, stupid* ("The Science of Compassion, huffingtonpost.com, 10/23/12).

When [Jesus] went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. The reaction of Jesus that day when the disciples came to him asking him to send the people home so that they could eat came out of a true sense of compassion. But did you notice how Jesus responds to them? Jesus doesn't say, I got this or don't worry I'll provide the food for all these people. No, what the compassionate one, Jesus, says to his friends who are just trying to be practical and help people get something to eat, is *you give them something to eat.* Listen again

to what Jesus says. *the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat”* (Matthew 14:15-16).

What happens next is what you and I would likely feel and say in the face of thinking about trying to provide enough for so many. *What are you talking about? All we have are a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish.* But that is where our feelings of scarcity, those feelings of we do not have enough, meet the reality of the abundance of God. As the story goes on to say, *and all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full* (Matthew 14:20). In his description of this story, Cody Sanders says that healing and feeding are the markers of God’s rule and reign in this passage. The kingdom of God come near in the form of compassionate healing and a feast (Rev. Dr. Cody J. Sanders, “Discipleship and Empire,” *A Sermon for Every Sunday*, 8/2/26).

The meaning in this story for us is not in what Jesus did, or that he acted, or even in the miracle of feeding all those people, but it is because he did what he did out of compassion. And not only did he act with compassion, but he empowered his disciples to act with compassion. *You give them something to eat.* What Jesus did that day, what he said that day, is what Jesus is saying to you and to me and is asking us to do and to be, people who act out of compassion. *You give them something to eat.* Henri Nouwen talks about this when he says, *what does it mean to live with a truly compassionate heart, a heart that remains open to all people at all times?* Nouwen points out that it’s easy to get bombarded with so much bad stuff that we just get overloaded and numb. But he says, *God’s compassionate heart does not have limits. God’s heart is infinitely*

greater than the human heart... And it is that kind of heart, he writes, that God wants to give to us.

What would it mean for you and me, to live with truly compassionate hearts that remain open to all people at all times? As we think about that question, I want to close with something written by poet Mark Nepo who says that *in seeking what is essential, we become essential. Seek a sacred life,* he writes, *and you become spiritual. Seek to live by faith, you become faithful. Seek compassion, you become compassionate* (The Book of Awakening).

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

