

Compassion

Today's scripture is one of those change-making stories of Jesus. It begins with compassion, as *all* change-making begins with compassion.

Jesus has just gone through a hard experience of his own. John the Baptist had just been executed—brutally, shockingly. His death, Jesus felt personally. John was his cousin; someone he'd grown up with. Their mothers were like sisters. So, Jesus was in grief. It's hard to feel someone else's pain when you're locked up in your own. 'Let's get out of here,' Jesus said to his disciples, his closest friends. 'Let's go somewhere quiet. I just want to be alone.'



Do you know those moments when your own emotions are roaring in you? Yes, I know. You just can't take in one more thing. This was that day. Jesus and the disciples got in a boat, and they set off to find a quiet place. But as they approached the shore, they began to see the outlines of people on the beach. So many. And then they realized there were hundreds—no, thousands of people who had already figured out where this little boat was likely to go, and they'd hurried over to be there when it arrived. What would you say in that moment when you are bone-tired and need time alone?

Jesus is not one of us. Because somehow, Jesus reaches deep down into himself and touches the Source that reminds him again of what is needed and who he is— even when he is bone-tired, even when his own sadness has flooded his senses. And he is filled with compassion, Mark tells us. Filled with compassion, the Bible said it was the gut-wrenching compassion, because he **saw** them. Jesus saw that they were lost, waiting for someone to come lead them. Jesus saw that they were suffering from their own grief, anxiety, and worry.

Their suffering mattered. And suddenly it mattered so much that Jesus taught them, and turned to his disciples and said, "They're hungry. And we must do something about it." And that's how this miracle of making food multiply began.

This is how change-making always begins. The heart of someone is moved. Some wrongness that might have stayed just out there; broken, unfair, not-right-but-not-my-problem gets inside of you. You feel the way that brokenness is hurting other people. And you know you *have* to get involved in its repair. You just have to.

Do you know an organization, Ashoka? For almost forty years, this social organization, Ashoka, has been sending social entrepreneurs, innovators for the common good, out into the world to be engaged in the work of solving the world's biggest problems. Like most social entrepreneurs, Ashoka is not a faith-based organization. It's entirely secular. Ashoka Fellows, change makers, have been fueled by empathy; their willingness, their ability, to see the world through someone else's eyes. Empathy is critical to being a change-maker, Ashoka believes; empathy is the first and most necessary thing. And they're right, I think; empathy can connect us to one another. Empathy fuels passion. It leads to the kind of new ideas that inspire other people and get them involved too. It leads to action.

But sometimes, even empathy is too small. Empathy is limited by the size of our own hearts. There's a limited range of people who we can identify with and understand and feel for. Empathy gets exhausted because we get exhausted. Compassion is like empathy in many ways. Just like empathy, compassion can connect us to one another. It too can help us to find our calling, the need that wakes up our passion. But compassion is different. Compassion depends not on the size and capacity of our hearts, but on our connection to God's heart. A God who loves us not because we are good, but because God is good.

What if our passion to make a difference in the world were rooted in an inexhaustible source of God's compassion? We have that in our heart, the presence of the Holy Spirit. Our Fifth Avenue Neighborhood Table started last May with compassion toward those who are lonely, isolated, marginalized, disenfranchised, and strangers in our community. We are relying on the Bible and the compassion of the Spirit. Without the Spirit of the Lord, we cannot have true connection to the people who are strangers to us. And who is this stranger? We remember the word of Jesus: "When I was a stranger, you welcomed me."

Some people might think and live that "My personal faith, inner journey with God, is enough in my spiritual life; in a deep experiential encounter with God." However, with time, a deep, experiential encounter with God will always lead to transformation that reverberates out from us into the world. It is my experience. The Jesuits call this "active contemplation" – a spirituality that is meant to be lived out in the world. In other words, the more we truly understand how loved we are by God, the more empowered we are to direct God's love out into the world. It naturally connects us to the world in compassion, in the spirit of God. In the spirit of God, our lives become a gift toward others through compassion.

It is like two mountains of personal holiness and social holiness that are mysteriously merged together at a certain altitude of the spiritual life. It was a vision given to me from the Lord. For the current state, if you feel like 'maybe it's someone else's calling but it's not mine'—that's OK. You can be entirely faithful in your own stage.

But if you are someone who has wanted to make a bigger difference in your home, in your neighborhood, in your work, or your school; if you see other people suffer and you might say, "I wish I could do something about that." Then think of it an invitation to draw nearer to Jesus. Whose power can make two fish and five little loaves of bread enough to feed five thousand people. Jesus asked, "Take a look... How much bread do you have?"

This is the challenge to us. We are created in the image of a creative God, the God who can feed five thousand people with just **five loaves of bread and two fish**. It's enough. When our hearts are full of compassion, this miracle reminds us, whatever we have in our hands will always be enough. Let's start with a small story.



Raul was a custodian in a church in Los Angeles. After his wife passed, he was lonely and decided to create a memorial garden for his wife. He grew boxes of herbs and vegetables, tomatoes on the vine, cilantro in bundles, and rows of his beloved's favorite roses of a dozen different hues. One day, he found that rose bushes were demolished. It looked like somebody hit them with a baseball bat. He cleaned the mess without any thought. A couple of days later, it happened again. Again, it happened. He didn't know what to do and was angry. One day he found a boy approaching the garden. A boy with a cane. He knew his family vaguely. The ten-year-old boy lived with his mother, his father gone, his brother was a gang member, now in prison. The boy wielded the cane like a weapon and lashed the rose bushes.

He noticed Raul staring at him from the window. The boy looked scared, then he glared in defiance and swiftly scrambled away. Raul's first instinct was to chase the boy down and scold him. His second thought was to call the police and turn the truant in. **But Raul saw the boy's eyes— the aloneness, the rage, the terror, the futility, and despair that would make a future in gang life all but inevitable. He saw the boy. The boy's eyes haunted him.**

Finally, he had an idea. On the road, he met the boy. Raul told the boy, "I have one thing to request." The boy responded, "I didn't do anything at all." Raul said, "I have a rose garden. I need somebody to protect the roses. If you keep an eye on the roses and protect them, I will pay for the work on Saturday, and I will teach you gardening. Give it a try?" He said, "Yes." Every day the boy came to the garden and kept it safe. And on Saturday, Raul paid the money to him and picked up the lemons and made lemonade together. It was the most delicious lemonade the boy ever drank.

What do you hear? Raul became a kind of mentor for the boy's life. Life grew in the boy and in Raul too!

This story is like a good Samaritan who walked toward the beaten and half-dead lying on the side of the street and who paid the cost of the beaten man's healing. Seeing with compassion connects us to others' lives.

Every day, we meet people in our small world. What do you see? Would you slow down your rhythm a little and try to take a little time to see truly and connect to people in your heart? And if possible, pay some cost of love: time, physical effort, money, compassionate listening ears, etc. It will give you great joy in your heart. In your small world, what do you see? Truly see with God. And ask God, "What do you want me to do? How do you want me to do?" There is wise guidance from the Lord. Your five barley loaves and two fishes will nourish your small world. Make your little world like a tiny heaven because we are sons and daughters of a creative and compassionate God.