

“Compassion”

Mark 6:30-44

July 22, 2018

Twenty years ago Robin Williams portrayed a doctor in a movie titled, “Patch Adams.” The movie was based on a true story of a doctor who, in the eyes of many doctors and other medical professionals, took a rather unusual approach to treating patients. In one scene, he was clowning around with the children who were in the hospital to make them laugh, to help them through their treatments. Many of the doctors in the hospital believed that his behavior was inappropriate and unprofessional.

In another scene, while doing his residency, he and a group of medical students were shown a woman’s foot that had been injured and was infected. As the woman laid there in her bed appearing a little uncomfortable with all of these future doctors gathered around her looking at her foot and the head doctor asking the students how they would treat the infection, Robin Williams asked, “What’s her name?” The head doctor got this strange look on his face as though he was thinking, “Why is that important? Who cares?” The medical students also appeared to think that Patch Adams had asked a rather odd question, but not receiving an answer he asked again, “I was just wondering about the patient’s name.” The doctor looked at her chart and said, “It’s Marjorie.” Robin Williams then looked at the woman and said, “Hi Marjorie.” Patch Adams was very disturbed that the doctors he met did not seem to show any compassion towards their patients. It appeared to him that the patients were treated as objects. So as a doctor, Patch Adams went out of his way to treat all patients with great compassion, which involved humor and love.

Are you a compassionate person? The dictionary defines compassion as “a feeling of deep sympathy for another’s suffering or misfortune.” According to that definition most of us would probably consider ourselves to be compassionate. But God takes compassion a step further than just feeling. He adds another element to that definition: action. The compassion shown by Jesus always includes an action response of love and mercy.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus’ disciples had just returned from a mission trip, and it had been an exciting but exhausting time for them. In Jesus’ name, they had healed the sick, they drove demons out of people, and they led people to faith in Jesus as their Savior. Just imagine if you could do such a thing today. Imagine if Jesus sent you out to do miracles in His name, and when you tried healing people in different cities in the name of Jesus it actually worked. So just imagine the excitement you would have when you returned to Jesus to tell Him everything that had happened. This is what is happening at the beginning of this text. In fact, their trip had been so successful that Jesus and His disciples suddenly found themselves swarmed by needy people. They hadn’t had time yet to talk, eat, and rest. People who think that Jesus doesn’t understand the fast and busy pace of life today need only to look at this story to know that Jesus understands the speed and pressure of our lives. At the same time, there may have been some frustrations during the trip if they encountered some people who rejected their message that they needed to discuss. Now the text doesn’t say they encountered negative people, but as Jesus prepared them for their journey, He also told them specifically what to do if people did not welcome or listen to them. So seeing the pressures that were coming down on those disciples, Jesus compassionately says, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” And so, along with Jesus, the disciples set out in a boat for a much deserved retreat.

But people followed them on foot; people from all the towns who recognized them ran to the place where they were going and even got there ahead of them. When Jesus saw all of these people following them you will notice that He did not say, “Oh, no; guys, we need to keep on sailing until we get away from these people,” and He doesn’t tell the people to go home and come back in a few days when He would have more time. While Jesus and His disciples were hungry and tired, and needed time to talk about their trip, Jesus saw that the needs of the people in the crowd were even greater. So He comes ashore, gets out of the boat, and takes time to teach and heal them. He doesn’t see these people as a burden, instead He sees their needs as an opportunity to show compassion.

But as the day went on, the disciples also had concern for the crowds. Evening was approaching, they were in a remote location, and food probably was not readily available. So the disciples encourage Jesus to send these people away so they can go home or get to a store to buy some dinner. That sounds like a very practical idea, but instead of following their suggestion, Jesus decides to use the moment to test His disciples to see what they had learned on their mission trip by saying, “No, don’t send them away, you give them something to eat.”

The disciples could hardly believe their ears and they quickly explain to Jesus, as though He doesn't understand the situation, that 8 months worth of wages would not be sufficient to feed this crowd. What's so amazing is the disciples were told by Jesus before they left on their mission trip, "Take nothing for your journey except a staff – no bread, no bag, no money in your belts," which they did and Jesus provided for them as they performed many miracles. But now they need another miracle in order to feed these people and Jesus is right there with them, and yet they don't seem to have the faith to believe that Jesus can meet the needs of the crowd. But before we criticize the disciples, maybe we need to consider just how often we are like them.

When Jesus told the disciples to feed the people they immediately started to complain about what they did not have; which sounds a little bit like us, doesn't it. We make far too many statements that begin with the words, "If only." If only I had more time...If only I had more money...If only I had been raised differently. When the disciples insisted that it was impossible for them to feed the crowd, Jesus simply asks, "How many loaves to you have? Go and see." In other words, it's like Jesus is saying, "Don't bother me with what you wish you had. Bring me what you have and we will use it." The disciples brought Jesus all that they had – 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. And Jesus took that small amount of food, looked up to heaven, and gave thanks. He began this meal in the way He began every meal. Notice that Jesus did not say, "O God, please make this small amount of food stretch a long way in order to feed this crowd or else I'm going to have a lot of angry and hungry people before me." Instead, Jesus thanked God and committed to God what He had. We all ask God for things in our lives, and there is nothing wrong with that, but if Jesus regularly gave thanks for what He had, even if it was small, then shouldn't we always give thanks when we receive from God those things that meet our needs?

Jesus knew exactly what He was doing as He prepared to feed those 5000+ people, even though the disciples had very little faith. And while I'm sure most of us have heard this wonderful story before, the question for us to consider is: "Can this kind of miracle still happen today?" And the answer is "Yes." First, Jesus is looking for people who can see beyond this miracle to the truth that it teaches, namely – with God nothing is impossible, and whenever we get into a difficult situation we need to turn to Him immediately in faith and trust Him.

Second, many miracles begin with a willingness to give. Jesus does not take what we have by force. He works with our willingness to share. We learn in the Gospel of John that the 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish actually belonged to a young boy who was there in the crowd. But the disciples did not take the food from the boy by force or demand that he give it up. Instead, the boy offered all of it to the disciples and Jesus used it to feed everyone in that crowd.

The bottom line is that when it comes to meeting our needs, our Lord never does the bare minimum. Those 5000+ people didn't have a little snack, the Bible tells us they ate until they were full and there were 12 baskets of leftovers. In other words, our compassionate Lord always gives us more than we need. Today, we have 23 students and 5 adults who are giving up a week of their time to serve God and others in the mountains. I guarantee some amazing miracles will take place this week. You might not see it at the time, you may not see the hand of God at work until later, but every miracle that God does through you this week will begin with your willingness to give – to each other and to the people you meet – because it is God's nature to care. In fact, whatever we are willing to give to God, He will use it and it will not only be enough, but it will be more than enough.