

A Sermon Preached at  
Saint Anne's Church, Nashville, July 23, 2006  
Proper 11, Year B, Mark 6:30-44

*The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.' But he answered them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said to him, 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?' And he said to them, 'How many loaves have you? Go and see.' When they had found out, they said, 'Five, and two fish.' Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.*

**FOCUS SENTENCE:** The compassion that comes to us from Jesus enables us to live compassionately ourselves and to show compassion from our own hearts for others.

I

Jesus and the disciples  
are ready for a quiet time.

The twelve have returned  
from their missionary journeys  
where they have performed acts of healing  
and called the people to repentance.

They are greatly excited  
by all that has happened to them,  
and they can't wait to tell Jesus.

"But first,"  
Jesus says,  
"we need to find a quiet place by ourselves."

The crowds are pressing on them  
so steadily  
that they have no time to rest  
or even to eat.

So Jesus loads the disciples into boats  
and leads them to a place  
he knows  
further down along the seashore.

When they get to their retreat site,  
what do you know!?

The crowd has followed them  
by land,  
and they have arrived there  
ahead of them.

Jesus and his friends  
get out of the boats  
and meet the people  
on the shore.

Doubtless  
Jesus looks closely at them  
to size up the situation.

These people have come  
to this deserted place  
on foot  
wearing sandals  
that have made their hurrying  
all the more difficult.

Their clothes show  
the dust of their rough journey.

But it is their expectant faces  
and their eager eyes  
that are most notable to Jesus.

Their fatigue gives way  
to their longing;  
they need to hear more  
from this Jesus,

who may actually have come to them  
from God.

And so Jesus “*has compassion* for them.”

Jesus’ compassion  
for the needs of the people  
wells up in his heart.

What he knows is  
that “they are like sheep  
without a shepherd.”

He right away  
changes the plans for  
his disciples and himself.

*His compassion for the people  
brings him to give up  
their rest time.*

Jesus pays attention  
to what the people  
seem to need,  
and *compassionately*  
“he begins to teach them many things.”

## II

Mark must have loved this story,  
because he recounts it to us  
with feeling.

Mark hasn’t just stuck this event  
in between the missionary journeys  
and the feeding of the multitude  
just ahead.

This isn’t just a literary interlude

to move Jesus from one place to another  
as you might find in a novel  
or a movie. No.

*This story is important to the church.*

*It's about Jesus' giving up  
looking out for himself and his friends  
in behalf the needs  
of other men and women.*

We can imagine that  
copies of Mark's gospel  
have been made;  
and they have been rushed  
by couriers  
to various churches  
where the story  
is needed so badly.

There are scores,  
perhaps hundreds or more,  
of brand new  
followers of Jesus Christ,  
some newly baptized,  
who gather weekly  
at great personal risk  
to eat the bread  
and drink the wine.

They want to hear Mark's report  
of how it all happened.

And,  
more than that,  
they will be  
informed and shaped  
by what they hear.

These small groups of followers of Jesus  
here and there

are going to learn something very important from these verses  
you and I are hearing  
this morning.

These brand new Christians  
are going to hear  
that *compassion is the power*  
*that moves from Jesus*  
*to those who need him.*

They are going to learn  
that Jesus' compassion  
they're witnessing  
on the shore of the lake that day—  
that compassion that brings Jesus  
to set all aside  
and to take care of those who need him—  
is what other new  
Christian men and women  
are learning to do  
themselves.

And they're going to realize  
what is required of them.

*Mark is telling a story*  
*from which new Christians will learn*  
*that Jesus Christ is calling them*  
*to be compassionate*  
*toward one another*  
*and to be ready to care*  
*for the needs of others.*

The disciples  
have been on the road  
preaching repentance.

Jesus is showing them what's next.

He wants them  
to have compassion

for the people.

### III

Of course,  
those hearing Mark's story  
read to them  
will discover  
that the disciples themselves  
don't understand it  
right away.

The idea of loving others compassionately  
more than we love ourselves  
is hard to catch on to.

Unbridled compassion for others is hard  
to come by  
in ourselves.

It takes practice and work.

Look what happens.

The disciples begin to realize  
that Jesus is so carried away  
by his teaching and healing  
that he has forgotten  
the time of day.

The disciples begin to get a little jumpy  
about what's going on.

In their fledgling compassion,  
their apprenticeship efforts  
to consider others,  
they come up with  
a sort of a  
"quasi-compassionate"  
suggestion.

They come to Jesus and say,  
“Jesus, this is a deserted place,  
and the hour is now very late.

“The most compassionate thing  
we can do  
for these tired and hungry people is to send them away  
so that they may go  
into  
the surrounding country and villages  
and buy something for themselves  
to eat.”

We wonder whether Jesus  
is thinking to himself,  
“These disciples of mine  
are rookies  
in the compassion business.”

He has a surprise answer for them.

“*You* give them something to eat.”

“Come on, Jesus.

“You’re not getting the picture,” they complain.

“What do you expect of us?

“Are we to go and buy  
two hundred denarii worth of bread,  
and give it to them to eat?

“Why, that would be  
two hundred day’s pay  
for a single working person.

“Be reasonable, Jesus.”

And there follows the story we all know.

Jesus' compassion  
comes forth from his heart  
once again.

From the five loaves and two fish  
brought to him,  
Jesus feeds a multitude of people numbering more than  
five thousand men, women, and children.

#### IV

It's easy to get distracted  
in the Scripture  
we have before us  
this morning.

If we were to make the feeding of the people  
the main thing here,  
and if we were to marvel at Jesus'  
power and cunning,  
we would be distracted  
from something more subtle  
that's in there for us.

It would be easy for us  
to miss  
that Jesus is acting *compassionately*, and you and I  
are *being called*  
*to be compassionate*  
toward one another.

This is a story  
about Jesus' compassion  
and about his showing forth compassion  
to the disciples,  
to the people in the crowd,  
to the young church  
for whom Mark is writing,  
and to you and me.

He shows us  
that whatever good we may be doing, however good it is,  
needs to be done  
with compassion for all humankind,  
near and far.

*You and I are called to be compassionate.*

V

We can't help in these Sundays  
along now  
this summer  
reflecting on our own church today.

Not to talk about  
what's going on among us Episcopalians  
is like ignoring  
the elephant that's in the room  
with us  
every time we come together.

The Rev. David Seger,  
a consultant visiting us in this Diocese,  
remarked to a group of us  
about his observation  
on the whole Episcopal Church.

We are no longer a "charitable church,"  
he said.

We have reached a point among ourselves  
at which  
there is no meaningful communication toward healing.

We count others as guilty  
by their association  
with their fellows and their ideas.

The result is  
that the Episcopal Church  
is losing its middle ground,  
Fr. Sever says,  
and it may not be possible to recover it.

What we need  
is a bridge built between the two sides,  
a bridge that allows us  
to be in relationship  
with those with whom we  
profoundly disagree.

Father Seger's suggestion begins,  
I think,  
with compassion for one another.

What if one Sunday  
folks in this congregation  
were to go out in groups of five or so  
to other congregations in Nashville,  
those who disagree with us and with whom we disagree.

We would listen to  
the adult discussion group.

We would go to the coffee hour.

We would be courteous,  
reverent,  
self-giving.

We would not honor  
the points of view  
we hear  
when we cannot honor them,  
but we would honor the people  
who *have*  
the points of view.

We would invite them to visit Saint Anne's.

Some might even do it.

I think—I'm not sure—  
but I *think*  
we just might begin to have  
greater compassion for those  
with whom we disagree.

Maybe,  
just maybe,  
the middle ground we need among us would begin to appear  
again.

## VI

But compassion isn't required  
just in the Episcopal Church;  
Jesus requires compassion everywhere.

In my study is a plaque that says,  
“Give a damn.”

(Somebody who thought I needed it  
gave it to me.)

I looked at it this week,  
and I realized once again  
that compassion is hard work.

That's what those rookie disciples  
were discovering.

Compassion,  
Jesus showed them,  
isn't telling people  
to go to the store  
and buy what they need.

No.            *Compassion*

*is giving them what they need  
from our hearts  
while caring passionately  
for their well-being.*

The disciples eventually discovered  
that Jesus *was* being reasonable.

His compassion began to rule  
among all who knew him,  
and then in all who became part  
of his church.

We remind ourselves  
then  
of what Jesus is saying and doing among those people this  
morning.

He is acting out before their eyes and ours and in the hearing of all  
that God through Christ Jesus  
is calling all of us,  
you and me,  
to become compassionate toward all humankind.

*The Reverend William Hethcock, Professor of Homiletics , Emeritus  
The School of Theology, University of the South, Sewanee*