

**Reading from the Gospel: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**

***It's All About Compassion***

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Sunday, July 19

I witnessed an interesting act of compassion this week. As usual, I was in a rush to get to my church office. Now you might not think that's too much of a big deal since I live less than a mile from the church, but it's amazing the number of times I'm on the road between my home office and my church office.

This time it was in the morning and I had a staff meeting to attend. My mind was racing through the upcoming agenda as well as other things coming up that day and later in the week. Let's put it this way ... my mind was preoccupied. That's when I saw her ... a young woman bent over in the middle of Columbia Drive with what looked like blue paper towels in both her hands.

She had come to the rescue ... of a fairly large snapping turtle that had decided to come up out of the creek on one side of the road and cross over to the other side of Columbia Drive ... at just the time when frantic drivers like me were trying to get somewhere. I stopped in my lane as she continued to encourage that old turtle across the road.

The lead driver in the other lane had also stopped. Cars were beginning to line up behind us. But that old turtle, with a little encouragement, scampered up and over the other side of the road and was soon on his ... or her ... way back down to the creek. I rolled down my window and yelled to the woman ... "Bless you ... and I'm sure that turtle thanks you, too!"

I headed on to work ... After all ... I still had at least another 200 yards of a long drive ahead of me ... and thought about that little break in my morning routine ... when I had to slow down ... and allow someone's compassion to be shared with me. And I said a little prayer ... and thanked God for that young woman's generosity ... and prayed I might have the same compassion for any other turtle I might meet later in the day ... whether it was a slow moving four-legged variety ... or the two-legged variety.

Compassion ... that's the heart of Jesus ... it shines strongly throughout the gospel of Mark. Nothing is ever planned in that Gospel ... life just happens before the eyes of Jesus Christ ... who is constantly helping turtles across the road ... one at a time ... with grace and compassion.

So listen now with your heart ... for that grace and compassion of Jesus Christ speaking to you from our reading from the sixth chapter of Mark, verses 30-34 and 53-56.

30 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.

31 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.

32 And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.

34 As he went ashore, Jesus 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.

53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat.

54 When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him,

55 and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.

56 And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Those are some my favorite words in the entire Bible when Jesus tells his disciples: *Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while*. Doesn't that sound just marvelous ... get away to a deserted place ... all by yourself ... alone ... no phones ... no email ... no TV ... no crowds of people ... and rest a while.

Do you ever long for such a place? Do you ever feel so overwhelmed with work ... deadlines ... demanding bosses ... kids screaming ... projects to finish around the house ... even demands of church committees ... seriously ... how many of you dread that 8:30 evening phone call from your pastor ... don't you just know he's going to ask you to do something or join some committee?

Demands can get the best of all of us. Believe me ... I know.

I know a clergy couple who, when they get away, will have absolutely nothing to do with anyone. One time, before I had even gone to seminary, Susan and I were vacationing with them and the four of us were out on a hike. An elderly couple came walking down the trail from the other direction. Our two pastor friends just stepped off the trail and let the trekkers pass by ... they didn't even say a word to them. I thought that was sort of strange behavior ... so I asked them about that later ... and they told me something that didn't register until much later in my life.

They told me that they clearly saw that the approaching couple didn't need anything ... they weren't struggling ... they were just out enjoying the wilderness like they were. My friends told me that when they get away from their pastoral duties of dealing with everything imaginable ...

the last thing they want to do is to stand there in the middle of their vacation listening to someone's life story ... they take time to get away and to rest ... to recharge their batteries ... both spiritually and physically.

Makes a whole lot more sense to me now. I guess that's why I so enjoy vacationing in the Okefenokee Swamp! But our gospel reading this morning isn't about rest and relaxation.

Yes, Jesus does make a point that you need to get away and to relax ... it's important for us to do that ... but this passage doesn't dwell on that ... this is actually a story that emphasizes the compassion of Christ in a non-stop string of events ... just like our lives can sometimes be.

Now I have to tell you, the lectionary groups that decided on this week's gospel reading left out some pretty important stuff in those verses I didn't read ... verses 35-52. So let me set the stage for you ... Jesus sends his disciples away to teach and to heal ... and they come back with some exciting reports of all they did.

And this is where Jesus tells them that it is time to go away and rest. That's the way it should be ... when you do the work and ministry of the Lord ... you need to come back to the source of what empowers you to do the work in the first place ... Jesus Christ.

It is time for Jesus to be alone with them ... to review what they had done ... and to keep them focused on what they are called to do. So across the lake they head. There's just one problem ... a bunch of turtles are there to meet them on the shore when they arrive ... a crowd with many needs ... and Jesus has compassion for them ... because he recognizes that they are like sheep without a shepherd.

Sometimes that's just the way it happens ... sometimes when we least expect it ... or least want it ... a turtle crosses our path ... someone with a special need, or in the case of Jesus ... a whole mob of people longing for his healing touch. And Jesus isn't about to ignore them ... rest will have to come later ... he will reach out to them now ... he will comfort them ... he will embrace their pain and their suffering as only Christ can do.

And then look what happens next ... In another part of what our lectionary reading leaves out is one of the most important examples of the very essence of Mark's gospel to our world ... it is here that Christ feeds all those who come to meet him in that deserted place ... he feeds 5,000 people that day from a basket of five loaves of bread and two fish.

The day is getting late ... the people are far from home ... and there is no question in the mind of Christ ... he must feed them ... not tomorrow ... not the day after tomorrow ... but now ... and once again his compassion and grace flow into the lives of the people as only Christ can do it.

Can you imagine that scene ... Christ blesses and breaks the bread ... and feeds them ... providing not just for their physical needs at that moment ... but feeding their spirits as well. That's the neat thing about all this Christianity stuff we profess to believe and emulate.

If you take the time to study the book of Mark ... at its heart you will begin to see that the more love and compassion of Christ that we show to our neighbors ... the more our neighbors will come to us in need of Christ's love and compassion.

Listen again ... the more love and compassion of Christ that we show to our neighbors ... the more our neighbors will come to us in need of Christ's love and compassion. We will be recognized as an even more compassionate and loving church.

And believe me ... there are all kinds of needs out there ... all around us ... people are hungry for what we have ... and we are called to be prepared ... as disciples ... to provide it. The homeless need a place to sleep ... the hungry need a little food to keep going or a cold glass of water ... someone might need a ride to the unemployment office ... someone might need a little help on their overdue utility bill ... someone might need a MARTA pass to get to a job interview ... someone might just be scarred because they are lonely and afraid and they just need someone who is willing to listen to them ... and by the grace of God they ring our doorbell.

There are people ... men, women and children all around us right now who are seeking the divine touch of our Savior ... who are also spiritually hungry for the bread of life and the cup of salvation. And the point is ... sometimes they will knock on our door when we just don't feel we have the time ... or have the strength ... or the resources ... or the stamina to deal with them.

And suddenly ... right there in front of you ... an old turtle needs to cross Columbia Drive ... someone with an urgent need shows up and slows down your day.

But the glory of it all is that you, too, will be fed in the feeding of someone with a need. It's always been a two-way street. God doesn't put someone at your door just to provide you with a reason to earn a good deed merit badge ... God puts someone at your door to allow the grace and compassion of Jesus Christ to flow through you ... and in doing so ... you, too will receive grace and compassion back through the person you help.

It's a blessing both ways. In his book *Here and Now*, the late Henri Nouwen has written, "joy is the secret gift of compassion." That's just how it is when you follow Jesus Christ. You have to trust that even when you're worn down and tired ... Christ is going to provide for those special times when you will be able to rest and be revived. Let me say that again ... Christ is going to provide for those special times when you will be able to rest and be revived.

It's just that sometimes when you follow Jesus Christ, you're going to get kind of busy ... and you just might have to grab a little peace and restoration while you're on the go ... if you are going to meet the needs around us when they happen and where they happen.

Now none of this sounds easy in a small church like ours. I can hear some of you right now telling me ... "If I have to do one more thing I'm going to be burned out. How do you expect me to drop all that I'm already doing here at the church and take care of every person who shows up for help?" Well ... that's true ... because we do have some people in this church who are doing a whole lot of work and really don't need another burden placed on their already full plate.

We're stretched thin. There's that old expression in the church ... "The same people seem to do all the work." But even though all that might be true ... if that's the case in your life ... then perhaps Christ is asking you to take a hard look at what you are called to do and be as a disciple.

After all ... what does Jesus in the Gospel of Mark tell us to do and be as Christian disciples? I don't recall reading anywhere in Mark that Jesus' main priorities were about session meetings ... committee meetings ... and pension plans ... and building maintenance ... and choir rehearsals ... and budgets ... and lease agreements ... though I do seem to recall something about a large potluck meal in our gospel reading today.

Now don't get me wrong, I've said this before ... all those things are still important ... critically important in the life of the church ... they provide the basis for what we are able to do in mission and outreach ... but they should not be, according to what I read ... the priorities of the church.

And friends ... that creates quite a quandary for us as disciples ... and it can make doing and being the church of Jesus Christ hard for us to figure out sometimes ... particularly when so much of our energy and resources are swallowed up by programs and details and meetings ... so that we don't have a whole lot left over to tend to the important issues ... in particular to the special needs of those we are called to serve.

What I do know in my heart is this ... if Christ is calling us to be disciples ... and we have accepted that call ... then we all need to be reminded ... and that includes me ... that when we get worn out by all the work ... all the committee assignments ... all the preparations and events that go on in the life of our church ... or even if you're one of those not actively involved right now in the work of the church ... we've all got to take a hard look at what we are being called to do ... to remember why we are called to be disciples in the first place.

What is our priority as the neighborhood church at Kirk and Columbia ... and what does that priority lead us to do and be as a Christian community? Pray for discernment ... pray that Christ will guide you and me in deciding how we will set our priorities for the building of the Kingdom.

The question is still this ... What will you do when a turtle is trying to cross the road? I believe the answer can be found in the heart of the gospel of Mark ... we are to always show the compassion of Jesus Christ.

In closing, here's how Henri Nouwen describes what compassion means. "It is not a bending toward the underprivileged from a privileged position; it is not a reaching out from high to those who are less fortunate below; it is not a gesture of sympathy or pity for those who fail to make it in the upward pull. On the contrary, compassion means going directly to those people and places where suffering is most acute and building a home there. God's compassion is total, absolute, and unconditional, without reservation... It is the compassion of a God who does not merely act as a servant, but whose servanthood is a direct expression of his divinity." (Henri J. M. Nouwen, from *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* in *Why haven't you left? Letters from Sudan*. p. 134.)

Let us pray:

You need the caring of my hands. Through my tiredness, may others find resting. You need a love that just goes on loving. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
**Amen.**