

August 6, 2017
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 55:1-5
Psalm 145:8-9,14-21
Romans 9:1-5
Matthew 14:13-21

Good morning. Let me first begin by acknowledging something we are all certainly feeling. It's been a tough couple of weeks for this congregation. We have lost two of our long time members. Two weeks ago Richard Turner returned to be with God and on Friday Billy Jewell made his own journey to God. And, then there was the loss of Evelyn Hyer, Ed Hyer's mother who passed away at 102 years of age.

I remember going home last Sunday and commenting on how heavy church felt that day. You could sense the weariness and sadness in the room. Grief is such a tangible emotion. It leaves us not knowing what to do or where to turn. In many ways, we find ourselves simply going through the motions as we try to make sense of our loss.

So, it's important that today we take time to acknowledge our grief and maybe more importantly that we make sure that we come together as a community to support one another...especially Marion, Nancy, and Ed as they move forward in the days and weeks ahead. Let them know how much they are loved. Let them know that you will be here for them no matter what. Keep checking in on them even if you think they are doing OK.

It is times like this that our community means the most, when we need each other's shoulders to cry on or strong arms to lift us up.

As I reflected on our loss, I was struck by the Gospel reading today. Our text in Matthew picks up right after Jesus has found out that John the Baptist has been killed by Herod. You can imagine the scene, the disciples arrive to tell Jesus what has happened. It's the moment of knowing your loved one is gone and you feel empty. And, in Jesus' grief, in his own experience of emptiness Jesus goes off by himself. We are told he leaves in a boat and goes to a deserted place. You know the emotions going through his heart. You know the loneliness he feels. His grief in this text is tangible.

In times like this we understand the need for deserted places. We understand the need to be quiet, to reflect, to be alone at times and let the reality of loss sink in. But, we also understand that we can't stay in those places. We know that there is life to be lived. However, there are times it's just too hard to get there on our own. We need those around us to come and walk with us. To help us connect again to the things that matter, to know we can indeed live again and emerge out of the deserted places that we at first needed to retreat.

When the crowds heard that Jesus was alone, they went to him. From surrounding towns people came to meet him on the shore as he returned. And I want you to imagine the moment he sees them, the moment he sees this great crowd, the moment he looks into their eyes and

they into his. It's a moment of beautiful connection, a moment of needing one another, of coming back to the things that matter. Jesus needs these people as much as they need Jesus. Each person in this story is experiencing some kind of pain, some kind of loss. And they end up surrounding each other with what I imagine to be a deep sigh of relief.

We are told one important word that for me defines this story. We are told that Jesus has compassion for the crowd. His deep sigh of relief comes forth in a desire to connect and to help.

Henri Nouwen, in his book called *Compassion*, has this to say: He says, "Compassion is not an individual character trait, a personal attitude, or a special talent, but a way of living together."

In other words, compassion is the simple act of caring for one another that makes the difference. It's the quality of knowing the pain of one another, of reaching out, of walking side by side. It's what compels us to move forward out of our deserted places.

What we know from our Gospel story is that a miracle happens in this connection. It is out of a painful experience that Jesus moves from a place of deep grief to a desire to help others and in doing so he feeds the 5,000 and he heals the sick. Now, we tend to focus on the miracle of the loaves and fishes when we read this story but today I want you to step away from that miracle. Instead, think about what we learn in this story regarding the nature of compassion. Think about what we learn regarding the nature of community and how God works through each and every one of us in our times of greatest distress.

We all understand the deserted places that life brings. We all understand the sense of aloneness that comes from those places. But, we also understand the importance of others to help us emerge out of those times. We need our own miracles. Maybe not of loaves and fishes but of love and healing. Healing of our hearts.

So let's reframe the miracle in our midst. Maybe the miracle is simply about how we experience the nature of God's love for us, of how we show that love to one another, of how we help each other – that's the miracle of compassion.

Nouwen talks about this kind of miracle with these words: "Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human."

What Nouwen is getting at is our ability to be fully present with one another. To not turn away in the midst of our suffering but to walk together. It's not always easy. In fact, even the disciples want to walk away in our Gospel. They ask Jesus to leave and let the people take care of themselves. I am sure Jesus is tired. I am sure he is still dealing with his own grief but he doesn't

turn away. He says, instead, that they will all stay together and that they will all be feed. That's the miracle of compassion. Everyone is taken care of.

And, I have to admit my favorite part of this story. It's the statement that Jesus orders them to stay. He orders the crowds to sit down and be cared for. Sometimes we need that. We need that command that allows us to slow down and be loved in our times of pain. It's a command that says, I understand, I am here, and you can rest.

Be that place of rest for one another and let these moments of sadness and grief be carried on one another's shoulders. Because, the miracle of compassion lives in each of you. Thanks be to God. Amen.