

What is Compassion?

Our gospel passage today begins as Jesus has just heard the report from the disciples first mission to the villages—a report about things they have done and taught. Jesus' response to their report is for them to seek a respite from what is going on around them. "He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place, all by yourselves and rest a while.'" Mark often does not give a great many details about the events he records, but after relating that the disciples have given their report, Mark sheds a little light on why they might have needed to get away. It seems that their report is not a quiet talking to Jesus about what they have experienced. Instead we are given a description of a rather demanding time. "For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat." Evidently, their reporting has not been a debriefing done in isolation, not a time when they are able to receive Jesus' thoughts on their work. The needs of the people coming to them were so great that even stopping to eat isn't an option. Continuing at that pace isn't a sustainable reality. "Come away to a deserted place, all by yourselves and rest a while. Jesus recognizes their need for rest and time apart, need for a time to refresh and restore themselves. So Jesus and the disciples again get in a boat and strike out for a deserted place to be by themselves and recuperate. But that plan doesn't really work out all that well. "Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them." So the deserted place was not deserted at all by the time they arrived. This passage, while it begins with the sounding of a strong note on the significant need for rest among our labors, it quickly seems to shift gears to move instead to talk about compassion. And in this move to telling us about compassion there is a definite linking between compassion and need of a very different sort than rest. I imagine that most of us have a general idea of what is understood when we see or read about compassion. We often express our reaction to things we see or hear reported on the news today as being compassionate. When we see events following natural disasters like the storms in the Midwest this week; the destruction and the loss of life and possessions our response is a feeling of compassion such as is described in our dictionaries. We think of it in terms of feeling pity or sympathy for the sufferings or misfortunes of others, often coupled with a desire to offer help. But this compassion is often at a distance and doesn't lead to actions. The activities of Jesus which are narrative in today's gospel text—including the major section which is skipped for the moment—occur because that while Jesus sought to go away to a deserted place with the disciples. They have even gotten back in the boat and sought that deserted place. However they found that they were seen by many who watched and then pursued them. The crowd pursues them because according to Mark they recognized them. This is something that Mark often mentions in passing—the recognition of Jesus when he comes so that crowds gather. What Mark does not tell us is how the people recognize Jesus. It's not like today when there would have been a picture taken which would have spread through the media. In fact, despite

the many representations which have been drawn by artist through the centuries, there is no physical description of Jesus anywhere in the gospels. This recognition began with the first disciples who answered Jesus' call to come and follow. The recognition of who Jesus is will always have to be in our recognition of what he teaches and what he does. So it is that as Jesus went ashore he saw a great crowd—and he had compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Compassion for those people who had seen in Jesus something that they needed led to Jesus teaching them many things. In the Greek the word translated as compassion has a more intense connotation than the definition found in a dictionary of the English language. The Greek word has its roots in the word that means “guts” and the seat of feeling. We too have a sense which connects strong feelings to our internal parts—“Feeling it in your gut.” You know that feeling—that feeling where your reaction to something sets your stomach churning. Something you see offends your sense of rightness so much that you may feel nauseated. You get a hitch that you actually sense physically, primitively. You feel a sinking pit, suddenly—even painfully in the area of your stomach. That's the compassion spoken of here—a visceral feeling. We are told that Jesus has compassion because they were like sheep without a shepherd. In other words, lost, lacking guidance. But even more Jesus sees they were in need of care, of protection, of pasture, of tending, of nurture. Compassion and need go together. And for Jesus, compassion is not just a feeling, not just pity or sympathy for what these people are feeling and suffering—compassion for Jesus is also about doing. And although Jesus has sought rest for his disciples, that now becomes secondary. Jesus has to show his followers that compassion is inherent to discipleship. Although this is neither the account nor the gospel where the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is given, this is Jesus being that good shepherd caring for his flock because they have need and he is compassionate. So the text tells us that Jesus' compassion led him to teach them many things. At this point we are given none of the teachings, but during this spending time teaching them the hour grows late. There is not mention of physical healings or deeds of power until much later. When the disciples come to Jesus asking that he send the crowd away citing a concern for the people—because although the crowd came because the people recognized Jesus, the region was a deserted place—no nearby villages or towns which could supply food for the crowd. Thus Mark tells us of the feeding of the five thousand men (and unnumbered women and children). Our text this morning skips this well known event and the event which immediately followed Jesus' eventual dismissing of the crowd. Instead we find that Jesus has gotten into the boat again after walking on water to join the disciples. Our text picks up when they again get out of the boat to find people recognizing them. People are reported to be coming to Jesus from the whole region bringing their sick on mats to wherever they hear that he is. Our text ends without again mentioning Jesus' compassion but reporting that all who touched even his cloak were healed. Key words from Mark are often “at once” and “immediately”. Despite the brevity of this gospel, there is a lot of activity. Jesus is traveling by sea and land. He moves

from the Jewish villages of Galilee to the gentile region of Gennesaret. There is so much need and he tends to all who come to him. When we studied the activity of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts, this was the same pattern. The Holy Spirit did not recognize the boundaries that humankind had established. In the letter to the Ephesians, the writer to this early group of believers who were gentile but had recognized who Jesus is, the activity of this movement of God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit is summed up: "For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." When we look around us today, that "one new humanity" spoken of in Ephesians seems to be a distant ideal; the walls of hostility have never seemed higher or to be so numerous. When Jesus looks at us and sees our great crowds he still sees sheep who are scattered because they have not understood that call given by God to be one in community with each other, we have not adopted or understood the lessons of compassion which he taught which links our compassionate sympathy to actions which answer the needs we see. We still would rather build walls than bridges. The question for us to consider for ourselves and our discipleship is the answer to that this: What is compassion? How do we embody this response of Jesus in our actions in response to the needs of others? Jesus still calls us to recognize him and be recognized as belonging to his flock through acts of compassion knowing we need both rest for healing and restoration and action to embrace the world God so loves. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.