

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
Sermon - Proper 11 Year B

As we begin to find both the comfort and challenge in the gospel text this morning, the first place my attention goes to is the vibrant and alive image of the swirl of people around Jesus. There's energy, there's a sense of people desperately wanting what Jesus has to offer, and there's joy. People are being healed. Men, women, and children are being released from whatever it was that held them captive. This is a scene of liberation! The joy and amazement that we can almost hear in their hearts is an outward expression of their encounter with the holy. The divine part of Jesus, the divine love flowing without boundaries within the person of Jesus, is drawing everyone nearer, almost as if Jesus were a magnet, drawing the whole creation back into an unconquerable force of love.

They can see it, feel it, and even if they didn't recognize this divine energy constituting Jesus as the Messiah, they reached for it. They asked the questions, "May I just reach for the fringe of his cloak", or "May I sneak in to steal a bit of healing". They weren't stealing anything. They were receiving freely offered compassion, God's greatest gift. Jesus was able to turn to the sheep without a shepherd with compassion.

Any of us in a healing or helping profession or vocation or those to whom people often are turned to for counsel or a listening ear, can probably think of a few other human emotions that Jesus could have responded with, such as exasperation or even irritation that he can't even rest for a moment. However, his compassion, the trueness of God, was that which he was giving away so freely. .

I often wonder what it would have been like to be there with Jesus, to be among the crowd that gathered and grew, to feel the power and the presence of Jesus, and to be so directly healed by his touch.

However, the joy of the resurrection is that we don't need to touch the physical body of Jesus to experience the compassionate nature of God and be healed. The crowds formed around Jesus because they needed to be in his actual physical presence, to be touched by him, or touch even cloak to receive and feel the presence of his saving and compassionate love.

But what Jesus did for us at the Last Supper and in his death and resurrection, opens us for us the presence of this saving and compassionate love, in the ordinary parts of our lives. We can experience this compassion in the moment our outstretched hands are responded to with the body and blood of Christ. Or when we come forward to the altar or to each other feeling empty or unworthy and we find a joy beginning to build within. Or sitting surrounded by nature and feeling a presence of grace, which

is larger than imagination and envelopes us with love. This is what divine compassion does – it restores us and makes us whole.

Jesus made it possible for us to not only experience this saving compassionate love in a multitude of ways, and Jesus also asks us to continue, as his body, to offer this to others.

And it is this saving and compassionate love that we want our church to offer – a compelling and compassionate love of God made real here, so that all who pass by or enter or live near by, will be drawn to something amazing and wonderful and life-giving. We want to be available for those who walk in hungry for purpose in their lives, yearning for kindness or understanding, and those who want merely to touch the cloak of Jesus and don't yet feel worthy enough to take even a small sip or a crumb of bread, we want them to be renewed and restored and made whole.

So this is the good news part of our story: because the divine compassion shown in Jesus brought Jesus to the cross for us and through his resurrection showed there was a power in the universe greater than our inability to recognize the divine among us, this compassion is accessible to us all, every moment, in many ways. Now that's just fabulous and I could end the sermon right now, and we could all go home happy and comfortable.

But we need to look at the challenge part of the gospel too.

Just as Jesus showed us the proper response to those in need is compassion, this means we too are to show this deep compassion to everyone. You may shake your heads and say, well, of course, I do that all the time, "I'm a caring person", I do good things, I volunteer a lot, I listen to people's problems." And I believe all those statements would be true. I do believe we at St. Andrew's are a deeply caring people. It's one of the reasons I can settle so deeply here.

But compassion goes beyond kindness and volunteerism and requires a large amount of ongoing and interior work.

For the disciples, this interior work, this finding a new way of consciousness, a thinner place to operate out of, was going on during the boat ride to a different shore. Whatever they needed to let go of to meet the crowd side by side, heart open to heart, needed to happen in that boat ride. They needed to find a place of vulnerability within, they needed to open themselves up to feel God's love so they could move out from that place, and shift from feeling people were there to take from them, but rather that they were there to experience the other and be with them, alongside.

It's not a bad thing for each of us to figure out for ourselves what it takes to move to this other shore of consciousness, which allows true and deep compassion for others. It can be the movement within us from doing for others to being with others.

It can be the movement from serving the community meals from behind a table to sitting with guests and having a real conversation with them or laying hands on them as they ask us for our prayers. There may be many ways we are called deeper into this place of compassion, and as we do, we find we are given life as we give it to others.

The Hebrew word which is translated as compassion actually has a much fuller definition in its original language. Compassion is womb-like love. Now when I think of womb-like love, it is love that holds life, gives life, and is intimately attached to something that is a part of you yet will become independent of you. It also speaks of being a part of the ongoing creation of something, which really isn't under your control.

Compassion is not an "at arms-length" emotion.

It is an emotion where barriers are torn down.

When we no longer think we're any better than or any worse than someone else.

This is when we no longer see differences between us and others, but see the sameness, our belovedness by God.

The other shore is when we let go of our judgments and find there's something else waiting for us – saving compassionate love, within us and within our hearts for others.

We are challenged by Jesus in our story today to open ourselves to feel God's compassionate love and to live it out in our relationships with others. We can find that thin place with God and it can lead us to thin places with others.

Now this challenge would be particularly appropriate for people who live out of their power or wealth, or the status in the community, or their education level, who want to have a power differential between them and others. And Jesus is asking them to make the equation like this (hands side by side facing each other), not like this (one hand above the other) and that can only happen when compassion becomes a part of the equation.

But when I look out among you, I wouldn't say we have a lot of that going on. But I do want to share with you a practical example of what I'm talking about, so you can see how it is a challenge to ordinary people like you and me, in our ordinary lives, just as it was to the ordinary disciples.

When I began serving here, one of the parts of the job description I was very excited about was offering a healing service at The Episcopal Home. I had a very rewarding ministry among the older folks at the parish I served before and was getting an inkling of the differing spiritual needs of that age group. But when I started, I came with the attitude of what I was giving them. I was offering them Communion. I was laying my hands on them and saying the prayer book words of healing over each of

them, and moving along at a not-rushed by steady pace. I was giving the residents something I was privileged due to my position to offer.

Now let's fast-forward 3.5 years. What we share each Wednesday is Holy Communion in the most complete sense of the word. I, and many others from our parish, enter into a time of shared compassionate love with the residents, with our friends and loved ones, and we are all saved and healed through it. Our prayers for each other are deep and meaningful and meet the heart of the person prayed for exactly where they are. There's vulnerability, there's openness, and there's joy, which tells me God is there.

I shifted from "doing something for" to "being with" people wherever I find them. That's the path toward compassion that Jesus asks of us today.

Discovering and moving out of divine compassion makes all the difference. It is what gives us purpose and reason for all we do and it is what fills our own heart and soul with a grace and joy the people in the crowd swirling and swelling around Jesus felt. This is ours to have and to give away.