

**Series: The Words of Jesus—Intimate Conversations**

**Today: The Feeding of the Five Thousand**

**Text: Matthew 14:13-21**

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**

**Sunday, June 21, 2009**

**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

Most of us have heard the term “burn out,” but you may not be as familiar with a term that has replaced it. The new term has a softer sounding name. It is called “*Compassion Fatigue.*”

*Compassion fatigue* is of primary concern for those in the caring professions (nurses, doctors, social workers, pastors), but it afflicts all of us from time to time. For example, those of you who speak to me about the five or six pieces of mail you get every day asking you for money may be experiencing *compassion fatigue*. Those of you who are caring for an aging parent or a spouse with multiple health care needs may be a victim of *compassion fatigue*. When the need is too great and there is more going out than there is coming in, that is *compassion fatigue*.

The best definition I found was on a website oriented to care givers for those with Parkinson’s disease, but it could be applied to those who care for loved ones with any number of long-term, chronic illnesses. *Compassion Fatigue is a physical, emotional and spiritual fatigue or exhaustion that takes over a person and causes a decline in his or her ability to experience joy or to feel and care for others. Compassion fatigue is a one-way street, in which individuals are giving out a great deal of energy and compassion to others over a period of time, yet aren’t able to get enough back to reassure themselves that the world is a hopeful place.* (Source: [www.pspinformation.com/caregiving](http://www.pspinformation.com/caregiving) )

One of the things I love about the Bible is the glimpses we get into a God who understands the human experience in an intimate way. In our text this morning, Jesus may well have been experiencing *compassion fatigue*. He had been traveling around Galilee which is a

small country only 50 miles from north to south and 25 miles from east to west. There were 204 towns and villages in that small area; none with a population of less than 15,000 people. He had been preaching and teaching nonstop for days when he received the news of the death of his cousin, John (whom we know as John the Baptist). That's when it hit him. He knew that the work he was sent to do was dangerous. It may cost him his life, as well. So a combination of grief and a dose of this reality made him want to get away for a while. He had to escape the demands of the crowd and find a place where he could be renewed in body, mind and spirit.

On the other side of the Sea of Galilee it was quiet. So he set out in the boat of one of the disciples for the other side of the lake hoping to find some peace. However, it was not to be so. The people could see where he was headed, and the crowds ran around the top edge of the lake and were waiting for him when he arrived.

As we take a look at what happened, I want to suggest that these words of Jesus show us three things about his ministry: His Compassion; Confusion of the Disciples; Miracle of Community.

### **Compassion of Jesus**

Perhaps what is most notable about the response of Jesus to the crowds who followed him was his compassion. He was exhausted, but he drew upon the power of the Holy Spirit within him to meet those who came to him at the point of their need. He healed the sick. He listened to their needs. He responded with compassion.

I stand in awe of what Jesus was able to do. Orange Street is a very busy street in Lancaster, and the needs of the world come through our front door every day. There are days when we have four or five requests of the poor and the homeless in a row. Usually Don and I share the load, but sometimes when one of us is out of the office, the other one has to see all

those who come in off the street. On days like that, I find myself spent. The need is just so overwhelming.

I have become convinced that the only way Jesus was able to have compassion on that crowd is that he saw himself as a conduit of the love of God. The ultimate outcome was not up to him. It was up to the power of God which flowed through him.

On August 31, 2005, FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) regional director Marty Bahamonde emailed the FEMA director, Michael Brown, regarding the situation in New Orleans immediately following Hurricane Katrina. Bahamonde wrote: *"Sir, I know that you know the situation is past critical. Here [are] some things you might not know. Hotels are kicking people out. Thousands are gathering in the streets with no food or water. Hundreds are still being rescued from homes."*

*"There are dying patients at the DMAT [disaster medical assistance team] tent. Estimates are many will die within hours. Evacuation in process. Plans developing for dome evacuation, but hotel situation adding to problem. We are out of food and running out of water at the dome, plans in works to address the critical need."*

*"FEMA staff is OK and holding own. DMAT staff working in deplorable conditions. The sooner we can get the medical patients out, the sooner we can get them [the staff] out."*

*"Phone connectivity impossible."*

The director responded: *"Thanks for update. Anything specific I need to do or tweak?"*

None of us were proud of what happened in New Orleans, but let's be honest. Michael Brown was experiencing *compassion fatigue*. Compassion is not easy to maintain. The compassion of Jesus is rooted in his total dependence on the power of God, and if we want to maintain our compassion, we must find it in the same place.

### Confusion of the Disciples

Before we move on to the feeding of the five thousand, we need to pause for a moment and at least take note that the disciples did not understand Jesus. They just didn't get it. They were confused by his compassion. They thought they had come to the other side of the lake to get away from people, and here is Jesus serving the people from whom they had just run. The disciples told Jesus to send the crowds away; that they didn't have enough food to feed them. However, Jesus invokes a spirit of hospitality. He asks them to share what they have. How many times do you and I miss being the blessing that God wants to give to others because we don't want to share what we have?

I remember the first mission trip I took to Kenya. I remember feeling utterly helpless in the face of the poverty I saw there, and I wondered what we could do as a church that would make a difference in the lives of the people we were meeting. I shared my frustration with our host, Dr. David Githii, who was then the pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Kiambaa. His response stays with me to this day: *"Listen to the people. Do what you can and trust God with the rest."* How often do we become confused by the overwhelming need we see in the world and fail to do nothing because we cannot do everything? How often do we fail to do what we can and trust God with the rest?

Today there is a medical clinic treating the needs of the people where there was nothing before. There are children going to school who would not have been able to go to school because they could not afford the school fees. There is a meeting hall where the community gathers to make decisions about its future. The poorest of the poor are being fed, and the most vulnerable of the village, the elderly, are cared for by the leaders of the church. It is easy to feel

overwhelmed by the needs of the world and become confused as to what we are to do, but if we do what we can and trust God to do the rest, God can do amazing things.

### **Miracle of Community**

Finally, there is the miracle of community which takes place when we share what we have with others.

There are many ways to interpret the miracle which took place when the disciples pulled out their five loaves and two fishes. We could interpret it literally; that what they had was multiplied to feed the multitude with twelve baskets left over. We could interpret it spiritually; that each person there took a small morsel and by the power of the Holy Spirit they were satisfied. However, I agree with those who interpret it more pragmatically; that what took place was the miracle of sharing.

If we picture the scene, we see a crowd, late in the day, which is hungry. However, it is highly unlikely that all 5,000 of them came with nothing to eat. However, who amongst them is going to pull out what they had lest they had to share it and not have enough for themselves? They were hungry, but they were also selfish.

So Jesus takes the lead. He says a blessing thanking God for what they are about to receive. It was probably the Jewish blessing that is said before every meal which reminds the crowd that everything they have is a gift from God: *“Blessed art thou, Jehovah our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”* He and his disciples bring out what they had and begin to share it with those around them, and it is like watching the dominoes fall. Once they begin to share, others pull food from their robes and soon everyone has enough—more than enough; so much more than enough that there are leftovers.

This is no less a miracle than the physical possibility that Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes into enough. We live in a world which is dominated by self-preservation and self-interest, and yet there are signs of hope all around us.

This coming October we will celebrate the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our daughter receiving a kidney from a friend of ours who gave it because she knew she only needed one kidney to function and she wanted Holly to live a normal life. Our donor's story has prompted many others to consider organ donation who might never have thought of it.

Michigan resident Matt Jones decided to offer one of his kidneys, simply because he knew someone would need it. "I thought that if I could help one person live a decent life, that would be great," Jones said. "It's turned out to be a lot more than that." Jones started the first-ever kidney donation chain.

A kidney donation chain is an innovative idea wherein family members continue to "pay it forward" (that is, after an individual is blessed by a new kidney, someone in the recipient's family agrees to donate a kidney for someone else in need). Matt Jones' kidney was donated to Barbara Bunnell. Barbara's husband, in turn, will donate his kidney to Angela Heckman, a woman he barely knows. After Angela Heckman receives Bunnell's kidney, Angela's mother will donate her kidney to someone else.

Ron Bunnell, Barb's husband, says, "I look at it as Barb got this gift from Matt, and I'm just paying it forward. It is terrific to be part of something bigger." [source: John Faherty, "Paying it forward proves lifesaver," The Arizona Republic; used in USA Today (7-24-07)]

The decision of Matt Jones to share his kidney is no less a miracle than the feeding of the five thousand. Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther said it this way: *God's wonderful works which happen daily are lightly esteemed, not because they are of no import but because they*

*happen so constantly and without interruption. Man is used to the miracle that God rules the world and upholds all creation, and because things daily run their appointed course, it seems insignificant, and no man thinks it worth his while to meditate upon it and to regard it as God's wonderful work, and yet it is a greater wonder than that Christ fed five thousand men with five loaves and made wine from water.*

### **Conclusion**

Compassion: it is hard to maintain unless the power to address the needs we see comes from God and not from ourselves. We must not be confused about what God can do if we will listen to the needs of others, do what we can and trust God with the rest. And we must never doubt what God is able to accomplish through the miracle of community.