

Matthew 14:13-21

where will compassion lead you?

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Who of us can truly know what Jesus was thinking when he decided to get away from it all? But we can imagine if we try. Jesus is living with the knowledge that his cousin, John the Baptist, has been beheaded to serve the pleasure of King Herod, whom John had called out for having an adulteress relationship with his brother's wife. Now John is dead for speaking the truth, and we can imagine Jesus is tired of it all. Perhaps he is afraid too. After all, he is human and he knows the consequences of truth. Or if not afraid, perhaps Jesus is simply born-tired, weary with the weight of a broken humanity that refuses to yield to the way of love. He has been preaching and teaching for some time now. The revolution is not yet here. It's time to get away from it all.

Can you imagine? Have you been there?

How long, O Lord, how long! Surely he sighs deeply when he gets into that boat heading for a solitary place. There are moments when the solitary place is the only place for the heart to recover from the burdens of life. The heartache of grief can be soothed by the care of others, but sometimes what your heart needs to heal is a solitary place. We don't know what was on Jesus' mind when he got in the boat, but we can imagine, and imagining we can draw close to him who draws close to us when we are carrying heavy burdens.

The people must be thinking that when they pursue him. What's remarkable is what Jesus does. Rather than row harder and harder to get to that solitary place far away from the people pursuing him - a strategy we might understand - Jesus listens to his heart. What he feels is compassion, and compassion is what summons him toward the people with healing in his touch.

Compassion in the heart of Jesus is something like a deep spiritual gps directing his life. He goes where compassion leads, no matter what else may be going on, including his own desire to get away. It's as if he knows that when he follows his own compassion it will lead him precisely to the place and the people where he is needed the most.

I find this helpful. Following your compassion will never lead you astray. In fact, I believe following your compassion will always lead you to Jesus and to the people where he is present.

As the day draws to dusk, the disciples do the sensible thing - the practical thing - for a people in need. It's too simple to criticize their counsel to send the people home before it gets dark. After all, what else can you do when you have so little to share for a crowd so large? My friend asks about this pivot in the story: has there been a time when you wanted to turn people away

when you simply had nothing to give? That the answer is yes and yes again need not be an occasion for shame or embarrassment. That you and I want to do the sensible, practical thing only heightens the radical generosity of Jesus that comes with the compassion opening his heart. Rather than send people away, Jesus draws them near. I believe this is what the compassion of Jesus does to our hearts too. With it, we draw people near, without it, we send them away.

You cannot know precisely what will happen when compassion directs your actions. It's never wholly predictable. For Jesus compassion leads to healing and human flourishing.

One thinks of refugees desperately seeking a new way of life. Send them away is, for some, a sensible practical thing to do. But the practical solution is rarely the one that Jesus chooses. He follows the compassion that opens his heart. Bring them to me he tells his disciples. Bring them to me. That same friend of mine asks, ***what might happen if our congregations discovered the courage to follow compassion in our lives and our communities?*** What if while discussing and debating the practical sensible thing to do, we paused a long time; long enough for compassion to open our hearts to something new. I believe compassion will lead us to the people and the places where Jesus is. That's not to say it is an easy place or a place where suffering goes away simply because you, moved by comparison, show up. Easy is pollyanna, not Jesus.

What happens when you dare to follow the compassion of Jesus is nearly always a miracle. I remember the pregnant immigrant woman who showed up in my office on Christmas eve after worship. It was raining and cold. She had walked to worship from the neighborhood looking for hope somewhere, anywhere. Unwilling to return to a abusive home, she cried - literally - for help. Rather than send her away, compassion drew her near and over the years, with the loving kindness of this congregation she flourished in ways that can only be described as miraculous. A master's degree, two healthy children, a new home and a loving spiritual community.

This is how compassion leads us to Jesus.

Jesus asks the people to sit down, and he shares what was present. That's all, he sharea what was present. A little bit of this and a little bit of that. Blessed, broken and shared.

This is the life that Jesus invites us to live together. A bit of this and a bit of that; it does not have to be much. Jesus can and does do miracles with very little.

Blessed, broken, shared? What will you offer?