

### **“Compassionate Living”**

“When he came ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.”

Evelyn was known as one of the kindest, most generous person in the community. She always greeting everyone with a warm smile and a cheerful hello; she was the first person to volunteer for a church event or a community fundraiser; and she was always the first person to welcome a new neighbour with a fresh-baked pie and a packet of information about the community. She had lived by herself in her modest house ever since her husband Robert passed away years ago, and even though they were never able to have children she served as a surrogate parent to scores of youngsters throughout the village. Robert's mother lived a few blocks away, and for years she was a daily visitor to her home, looking in on her and making certain that she had everything she needed. She was, in the eyes of all who knew her, the epitome of generosity, a role model parents held up to their children as to how a person could lead a truly good life.

But over the past several weeks, people began to notice a change in Evelyn. The smile, while still present, didn't seem to be as spontaneous and genuine. She appeared to be cutting back on her volunteering, and even missed a few Sunday worship services – something that hadn't happened in decades. She wasn't seen as often in the downtown stores, and when she was sighted she looked busy and distracted, even walking by people she had known for years without saying hello. Her home, always kept spotless, was beginning to look rough around the edges, and even her personal appearance was not as immaculate as it had always been. Something was happening in Evelyn's life, but no one knew exactly what was causing this sudden change.

One day, Evelyn's friend Joan stopped into the local coffee shop and spotted Evelyn sitting by herself in a corner booth, staring into space. They had been friends ever since grammar school, and Joan had never known Evelyn to appear this sad and lost; so after ordering her coffee, Joan went over to the booth and sat down across from her friend. At first, Evelyn was startled to see Joan; then a tiny smile – not her usual sunny countenance – appeared on her face. After exchanging small talk about the weather and the price of vegetables, Joan asked Evelyn how she was doing – a question that opened the flood gates of Evelyn's pent-up emotions. Tears streamed down her face as Evelyn began sharing with Joan the reasons for her sudden change of temperament. It began with her mother-in-law, who was showing signs of dementia and was making increasingly unreasonable demands on Evelyn, even calling her in the middle of the night and demanding that she come over to her house for the smallest need. She had also recently learned that her favourite nephew had been diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer and was undergoing intense chemotherapy. A dispute among members of her church had created a great deal of tension, and unfortunately Evelyn found herself caught in the middle of this intractable division. A new neighbour was playing loud music into the early hours of the morning, keeping her awake at night and worried about what else might be happening in that house. Evelyn apologized to Joan for not being her usual self, but Joan recognized that what was happening to Evelyn was not her fault but was the result of a condition that she was seeing all too frequently: *compassion fatigue*. Defined as “*the profound emotional and physical erosion that takes place when helpers are unable to refuel and regenerate*” (Compassion Fatigue Solutions), compassion fatigue occurs when a person who is involved in caring for others becomes overwhelmed by the demands of their occupation or situation, and lacks the means or opportunities to step back and find opportunities for relaxation and refreshment.

- “Studies confirm that caregivers play host to a high level of compassion fatigue. Day in, day out, workers struggle to function in care giving environments that constantly present heart wrenching, emotional challenges. Affecting positive change in society, a mission so vital to those passionate about caring for others, is perceived as elusive, if not impossible. This painful reality, coupled with first-hand knowledge of society’s flagrant disregard for the safety and well-being of the feeble and frail, takes its toll on everyone from full time employees to part time volunteers. Eventually, negative attitudes prevail.” – Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project.

Working in a long-term care facility, Joan had seen many of the symptoms of compassion fatigue – difficulty concentrating, hopelessness, exhaustion, irritability, and high attrition – affect her co-workers. Sitting across from her once-gregarious friend, she saw the same signs in Evelyn’s demeanor, and she knew that unless Evelyn was able to find help in dealing with her compassion fatigue, it was going to have a negative impact on her physical and emotional health as well as on her ability to continue to live the compassionate life that had blessed so many people for so many years.

While the diagnosis of compassion fatigue is relatively recent, we can see signs of people who are experiencing this malady throughout history and even in Scripture. Fleeing from the murderous rage of Jezebel, the mighty prophet Elijah sits down under a broom tree and appears to be completely fatigued, asking that he might die: *“It is enough; how, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.”* (1 Kings 19:4). The prophet Jeremiah, who had been called as a boy to proclaim God’s word to the nation, lashes out at the Lord in the midst of his fatigue and discouragement: *“O LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me.”* (Jeremiah 20:7). Even our Lord Jesus Christ appears to be susceptible to compassion fatigue in today’s Gospel lesson, in which Matthew reports that *“when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.”* (14:13). What Jesus has heard was the news of the execution of John the Baptist by Herod Antipas, what had been murdered at the whim of Herod’s wife. Jesus withdraws to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, where Herod Antipas had no authority and where he could find solace in the midst of his grief and fatigue. His withdrawal is in keeping with the advice given to many persons who are showing symptoms of compassion fatigue, especially after undergoing such a devastatingly traumatic experience:

- “Jesus’ withdrawal ‘to a deserted place’ it seems, can only be understood as a self-preservation strategy. My ministerial training approves: ‘When the going gets tough, the wise go on a retreat.’ A boat trip to a desert location, lots of sleep and rest, some journaling and reading. Regather and refocus. This is all good, so far. Textbook stuff.” – Peter Woods.

But even though Jesus was on the other side of the lake, the crowds continue to follow him; for *“when he came ashore, he saw a great crowd”* (14:14). At this point, no one could blame Jesus if he asked these insatiable crowds to give him some time and space to recharge his batteries; he could have sent his disciples to tell the crowd that he was not available at the moment and would get back to them in the near future. But even though he is clearly in mourning over John’s death and may be experiencing symptoms of grief and fatigue, Jesus does not turn his back on the crowds; instead, when he sees them on the shore, *“he had compassion for them and cured their sick.”* This “compassion” (*splanchnizomai*) is one of the attributes of the Messiah, a means through which people may know that Jesus is truly the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

- “A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he came to him. ‘If you choose, you can make me clean.’ Filled with *compassion*, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’” – Mark 1:41.
- “There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, ‘Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!’ ... Moved with *compassion*, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.” – Matthew 20:30, 34.

Even in the midst of his own grief and fatigue, Jesus cannot deny his essential messianic nature; as Paul would state in his second letter to Timothy, even “*if we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself.*” (2 Timothy 2:13).

- “Jesus’ deep human need for self-preservation was sublimated here by his deeper motivation and core value of always living from a place of compassion” – Woods.

Jesus’ core messianic compassion continues as the day turns to evening and it becomes apparent that the crowds, in the haste to travel to the place where Jesus was staying, had not brought sufficient food to satisfy their hunger. The disciples are concerned for these people, who are not pictured as hungry and destitute, unable to purchase food, but as being so enthralled with Jesus’ healing activity that they are reluctant to leave. Out of concern for their physical well-being, the disciple approach Jesus with a recommendation: “*This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.*” (14:15). The crowds who were hanging on Jesus’ every word would certainly heed his advice and leave to seek food, which would also give Jesus a break from their demands so that he might address his own need for rest and renewal. Both Jesus and the crowds, the disciple might have ascertained, needed to be nourished in different ways. But instead of taking their advice, Jesus has another suggestion: “*They need not go away; you give them something to eat.*” (14:16). This is clearly not what the disciples expected to hear; after all, how could they possibly feed such a massive crowd by themselves? Like the crowds, even they hadn’t anticipated that they would need to bring a sufficient amount of food to feed twelve hungry people; all they have to offer Jesus are five loaves and two fish. (In John’s account, it is a little boy who brings the loaves and fish; the Evangelist also includes the disciples somewhat sarcastic question, “*But what are they among so many people?*” – John 6:9). But Jesus is undeterred by these meager rations, and remains steadfast in his refusal to send the crowds away. Instead, he orders the disciples to bring the loaves and fishes to him and the orders the crowds to sit down on the grass.

- “Taking the five loaves and two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.” – 14:19-21.

The Feeding of the Five Thousand (which is five thousand families, which could mean anywhere from 20,000 – 30,000 persons or more) is the only miracle story that is included in all four Gospels. In words and actions that anticipate the Last Supper and Jesus’ giving us the Sacrament of Holy Communion, Jesus “blessed and broke the loaves,” and then gives the disciples the task of distributing this miraculous meal to the crowds, satisfying their hunger. The abundance of the leftover pieces, along with a meal that satisfied the hunger of every person, is a documentation of the greatness of this miracle and a testimony to Jesus’ embodiment of the steadfast love of God that is evidenced in his insistent compassion even in the midst of his personal grief and fatigue.

- “Jesus’ blessing brought abundance from the meager provisions of the disciples. In this action, Jesus offers us a sign of the Kingdom of Heaven that he has been teaching about in the parables. A feast results from the smallest of portions – remember the mustard seed and the yeast. In this miracle we witness an example for Christian life and ministry. Even the smallest of offerings can produce abundant results when placed in the service of the Kingdom of Heaven.” – Sunday Connection, Loyola Press.

The church that confesses its faith in this compassionate Messiah is called to “*serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus.*” We are called to care for others, to be the ones who will be living examples in word and deed of the love of God that is present among us in Jesus Christ. The Church that is called and gathered as God’s people has “*no mission but to serve in full obedience to our Lord, to care for all without reserve, and spread God’s liberating word.*” (“The Church of Christ, in Every Age” – ELW 729). While it is clear that it was the Lord who provided the abundant feast that satisfied the hunger of that crowd, it was the disciples who were charged with distributing that messianic feast – and it continues to be our task as disciples of Christ to share what has been entrusted to our care with all people who our compassionate Lord and Saviour desires to be fed.

- “This passage gives us hope, whether we are individuals or small and struggling congregations; we have the means to do more than we think we can do for God’s suffering people. Jesus offers a vision of the abundant life, the kingdom of sharing God’s resources here and now. This passage urges us to bring any small gifts that we have – money, talent and time – to dedicate them to Jesus, because he will multiply what we have as we give it to others.” – Grace Ji-Sun Kim, Bread for the World.

As significant a lesson as the Feeding of the Five Thousand offers us, some have suggested that it is the second miracle in today’s Gospel. The first miracle, the one that sets the stage for the miraculous feeding, is the compassion that Jesus is able to feel for the crowds that have interrupted his retreat, the compassion he is able to put into action even when he is showing symptoms of compassion fatigue in the midst of his own human frailties. As Jesus provides the disciples with means to fulfill their mission to give the crowds something to eat, he is also providing his followers with the means to continue to reach out to others with compassionate love even when our own resources for compassion have been depleted and we find ourselves discouraged and fatigued in the face of life’s ongoing demands and expectations.

- “The primary miracle, as I read it from the demands and exhaustion of pastoral ministry, is that a human being endangered by a head hunting king, in grief over John’s death, exhausted by an itinerant ministry, can find the compassion in the midst of all this to care about healing and feeding those needy crowds. Could it be that compassion practiced self-sacrificially can cure exhaustion? Is it just possible that compulsive boundary keeping and safe scheduling protects and preserves the false self, and keeps me from finding my true self in compassionate care? My pastoral care manuals say “NO!” My master says, ‘Follow me!’” – Woods.

As Luther teaches us in the *Small Catechism* that “*by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him,*” neither can we by relying on our own strength and resources live as compassionately as our Lord, nor can we offer the compassionate love that the world so craves. As the disciples did not have the physical resources to feed the hungry crowd, neither do we have the resources of compassion that will give us the strength even in our moments of greatest weakness and fatigue to fulfill our Lord’s expectations of compassionate living for his Church. As we need God’s Holy Spirit to give us the ability to believe in our Lord and

Saviour, we also need to rely on the Spirit's presence and power to give us the compassion that will make us the vessels to share Christ's love in all circumstances, even when we do not have the resources to be the loving presence of Christ in a world longing for the compassion and caring that are at the core of the Messiah's continuing presence in the life of God's world.

- “God's essence is compassion, and there is a significant link between divine compassion and the kind of ministries to which the church is called. Compassionate ministry is not just one type of ministry alongside others... responding to the massive needs of the world with well-intentioned programs, methods, and technology is not enough. Our ministry and our internal lives must be thoroughly transformed by the same compassion found in Jesus.” – Bryan Stone, *Compassionate Ministry: Theological Foundations*

As compassionate and caring as Evelyn had been throughout her life, the overwhelming demands of her current situation had depleted her personal resources and left her fatigued and discouraged. Joan continued to reach out to her friend, gave her the time to pour out her frustrations, and was gently able to help Evelyn see that she could no longer rely solely on her own abilities, that she needed the support of others to share her burden. She was able to find a caregiver to assist her mother-in-law; she recruited other volunteers to assist her with projects in the church and community; and she even found other neighbours who were willing to bake those welcoming pies for new residents. Above all, Joan was able to help Evelyn understand that compassion and caring are not qualities of which we have in an unlimited amount, but are gifts that are entrusted to us by our compassionate Saviour so that we can do abundantly more through Christ than we could ever hope to accomplish on our own. Slowly, Evelyn regained her cheerful demeanor, and was able to once again be the compassionate person she wanted to be and that others needed her to be. Her lesson is one for us to learn as well: compassionate living is something that we cannot accomplish on our own – but with God, all things are possible!

Amen.