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The Word of the Day  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

“Jesus withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd and had compassion for them and cured their sick.” Matthew 14:13-14

I remember watching several instructional television programs for children when I was a child that featured a word of the day. While I don't remember the names of the programs, I do remember the way they wove the word for the day through the entire program. Not only were there cool sounds every time someone on the program said the word for the day, there were examples given for the definition and spelling of the word, how to correctly use it in a sentence, and what the word looks like in real life. Such an integrated approach made it possible to learn more than just how to spell a word and use it in a sentence; it made it possible to learn how to make the word for the day part of my life every day.

After reading today's Gospel lesson, we could say the word of the day from Matthew's Gospel is *compassion*.

Compassion is one of those words we might hear a lot but can forget its meaning. Compassion can be mistaken for other feelings like pity. Pity is when you listen to or notice the suffering of someone else and think to yourself or say out loud that you “feel sorry” for the person. This is not a disingenuous emotion and it can lead to acts of charitable giving, like donating to causes like food pantries and non-profit programs that help people in need. There is nothing wrong with these actions, they can help a lot of people. But they have a shadow side that keeps the giver separated from the receiver. Pity lets you acknowledge another's suffering while keeping one foot firmly in your place of comfort or security and charity lets you feed another without ever having to share their pangs of hunger or feel the concern and worry of how they will get out of the situation that makes hunger a regular part of their life. Pity and charity are not bad feelings, and I am not trying to demean them. They can be helpful in leading to first steps in recognizing the humanity, need, and injustice suffered by fellow children of God and making the changes needed to transform lives and our society for the better.

My point is pity and charity aren't the same emotion as compassion, which is the emotion Jesus felt in today's Gospel and is the same emotion that motivated his presence and work in today's Gospel.

The word in the original Greek translated as *compassion* is a word unique to the language, making it difficult to translate to modern English. It is a word that can be translated literally as "gut twisting", meaning it is a powerful emotion a person feels in their deepest being, so much so that they may feel it physically and emotionally. The English word compassion can be defined as "suffering with". It is worth noticing that in today's Gospel we read Jesus felt deep emotions, not only the positive emotions, he also felt the suffering of others. He didn't feel sorry for them, he didn't keep one foot carefully planted in the comfort of knowing he wasn't like those who were suffering, and he didn't let anything come between himself and the people he interacted with.

That's important to pay attention to because it tells a lot about the Mystery of the Incarnation, of God becoming human and dwelling with us, which is what Jesus is. As the Incarnation, Jesus didn't show us a God who is distant, and feels sorry for our suffering, but is instead deeply moved by our suffering and feels it with us.

We might ask how did Jesus get to this emotional place of compassion? To encounter a large crowd and feel in his deepest being their pain, their suffering, their hunger? Just before the section of Matthew's Gospel we read for today, Jesus had heard the news that John the Baptist died, that he was murdered by King Herod. This was a deep and tragic loss, as well as an abuse of power and injustice, and Jesus responded by removing himself from public, by going to a deserted place by himself to pray. Perhaps his time alone was time to let the loss of John the Baptist sink in, and to feel the pain of grief. As anyone who has lost someone whether it was a friend, associate, spouse, or family member can attest, grief is one of those deep emotions that a person can feel in body, mind, heart, and soul. That is why it is important to give yourself time to grieve and to be gentle with those who are grieving.

Those who have experienced grief might also have experienced how grief can sometimes open your heart and mind to recognize and empathize with others who suffer. Grief might have its time of separation, but it can also be a bridge connecting people together, especially people who share the same kind of loss or suffering. That is why there are support groups for people with terminal illnesses or people of loved ones dying of diseases like cancer and other types of support groups. Having a safe place or persons to share your grief with can be healing and life giving.

Which is perhaps why Jesus emerged from his own time away to grieve with a heart of compassion for those who came looking for him. I wonder if he thought they must be suffering terribly to go to all the trouble and effort to find him in such a deserted and lonely place? It seems when Jesus looked at the crowd that found him, he felt closer to them, his grief had matured into compassion, and he found himself suffering with them.

To suffer with someone is to give something of yourself, which is what Jesus did when he healed the sick and is something I am sure those who have given of themselves to care for a loved one can relate to.

Of course, there is more to today's Gospel. There is the iconic miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand. Lots of churches base their feeding ministries on this miracle of Jesus. And there is nothing wrong with that. It is inspiring. But there is more to this story than food. Like the word of the day in the television programs of my childhood, the feeding of the five thousand is also Jesus showing his disciples then and those of us who follow him today what compassion looks like.

Perhaps the disciples had seen Jesus' acts of compassion in healing people and wanted to try their hand at being compassionate, to show they care. So, they suggested Jesus send the people away from the deserted place before it gets too late for them to get something to eat. That is certainly a hospitable idea. And I love how Jesus hears their idea and suggestion, perhaps recognized the disciples' desire to be compassionate, and takes what they gave him - their idea - and then shows them and us the model for compassionate giving. He received their idea, in a way blessing it by recognizing it, then he broke their idea. He broke it wide open and then gave it back to them when he said the people didn't have to leave to get something to eat, the disciples could feed them. Did you notice how the disciples balked when they said they couldn't do that because they had so little? But Jesus took the little they had like the idea that started this part of the Gospel, blessed it, broke it, and shared it and not only was everyone filled, there were leftovers.

That's the heart of compassion: giving what we have to Jesus, letting him bless it, break it, and give it back to us so that we can share what we've been given. This model works on things besides loaves and fish. It's what we did at Church of the Good Shepherd with the 100 face masks given to us by Habitat for Humanity. We opened the packages of ten masks, safely packaged them individually and put them on the Tree of Giving surrounded by the prayers on the Votive Prayer Hill in front of the church building. This wasn't a charitable act. We aren't feeling sorry for

anyone. We shared what we had been given because we all must wear face masks when we are in public. By giving them away we are showing we are in this pandemic with our neighbors; we really are in this together.

If there ever was a time for compassion, this is it. This pandemic is an unprecedented, weird, uncomfortable time. It is causing change and change can bring about fear, grief, and suffering. We may not all be suffering in the same way. Some people may be struggling to adapt to the new mandates to social distance and wear facial coverings. We need to understand behind the anti-mask movements there may be deep unresolved grief over a loss of a sense of control and comfort as habits, routines, and a way of life has been changed. Yelling at people to wear a mask or step back a few feet probably won't change anyone's heart, but who knows what a little compassion might do? Others might be suffering with the symptoms of COVID-19, and blaming them won't cure them, but who knows what a little compassion might do? There are people deeply grieving the loss of loved ones to the virus, and it can't be hard to image how much they need our compassion right now. Some people are just afraid, watching daily numbers of the infected rise and fall, watching laws and decisions being made, and these changes only increase their fear. How might we show compassion to the fearful? And how might those who are feeling all these emotions: frustration, anger, fear, grief, how might you show compassion?

I believe kindness is the first step to compassion. This is a difficult time. The word unprecedented keeps being used because none of us was prepared for a global pandemic. And believe it or not, most of us are doing the best we can with what we have. We are all struggling. No one knows the "right" thing to do in every situation. All we can do is learn, listen, and try. So whenever and however we encounter one another, let's remember to be kind to each other. We may not be experiencing this pandemic the same way, but we truly are all in it together.

Today's Gospel shows us the next step to compassion. We can invite Jesus and his Godly compassion into all this by giving him all we have right now. Our ideas, our materials, our hopes, our energy, our time, skills, our sense of humor, our face masks, our facilities, our concerns, our love... whatever loaves and fish we have... and let Jesus bless those things, break them wide open, and give them back to us so that we can share them. When we let compassion transform what we have, maybe what seemed small, or not much, or not enough, will become more than we imagined and might be the very thing needed right now.