

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

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Scripture: Matthew 14: 13-21

"Immeasurable Compassion"

I find it interesting that today's Holy Gospel starts with the words "*When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.*" Were you wondering "WHAT happened?"

Earlier in the 14th chapter of Matthew's Gospel we are told that Herod the Tetrarch, also known as Herod Antipas, the king of Judea, and the son of Herod the Great (one of four sons) who is now dead - had John the Baptist arrested and killed. He was not just killed, but he was brutally beheaded, because "*the daughter of Herodias danced... and pleased Herod.*" (Matthew 14:6) The king promised her whatever she wanted, and as she was encouraged by her mother Herodias, and so she demanded: "*Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.*" (Matthew 14:8) As the first line of today's Gospel reading says "*When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.*" Wow, that gives some real insight to what Jesus might have been feeling as He sought some solitude – some alone time. Who doesn't need alone time now and then? It is important to concentrate, to pray, to focus. That is what Jesus was trying to do – to connect with the Father – just to get in that 'right place.' He knew what was going to be happening and He was deeply troubled by the death of His cousin, His family member was not just killed but he was decapitated! He wanted some solitude, some alone time – only to have the crowds following Him. I can see the situation, but I cannot possibly imagine how Jesus, except to say that He is God, dealt with all of this! The desire to be alone and have some peace must have been incredibly great.

In fact in today's Gospel message Matthew tells us that Jesus sought that solitude and "*He withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns.*" (Matthew 14:13) Try to imagine being in Jesus' place, if you can. He had nowhere to run, nowhere to hide – and had not a moments rest. How did Jesus deal with this? The Gospel tells us that "*When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd; he had compassion on them and healed their sick.*" (Matthew 14:14) Let's do a flashback – back to the reading from Nehemiah 9:17 which tells us that "*God is a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.*" I find that absolutely amazing as it ties this together. Did you hear what Jesus did? **He felt compassion for them and healed their sick.** Jesus knew of their ills and He wanted to heal them. Just the thought of that grabs a hold of me and makes me sit up and take notice. Jesus' feeling compassion for them is a remarkable phrase and carries an awful lot of truth with it. This word COMPASSION catches my attention – which, I believe reveals a great deal about the nature and character of Jesus Christ; about the nature and character of Almighty God!

The Greek term used to represent compassion: σπλαγχνίζομαι (splagchnizomai) (which is pronounced *splag-nizo-my*) is related to one's inner parts – one's deepest place, meaning one's center for personal feelings and emotions – one's center. To put it plainly – a yearning or longing from deep inside to act on someone else's behalf; a feeling in your gut that is aroused

by another's suffering or pain. I know most of the people in this room – I have heard stories from you – testimonies about how you have reached out to people in need, in pain, people who are hurting – physically, emotionally and or spiritually. That is *splagchnizomai* – really incredible if you think about it. It would seem to me that a significant aspect of Jesus' ministry was His active compassion toward the suffering of others. Compassion is not just feeling for someone - but wanting to help relieve that pain or suffering. But please - don't confuse compassion with pity. Pity is just feeling sorry for someone – and may even involve looking down upon someone in a condescending way. I am sure we have all seen a situation where someone has pity on someone – but they are looking out of the corner of their eye – and judging them.

Throughout the Gospels there are many examples of Jesus' compassion exhibited by miracle after miracle. I am not just talking about feeding of the multitudes from five loaves and two fish which is in today's Gospel, or even the feeding of the four thousand, which is mind boggling in and of itself, but there are others marvelous examples of the compassion and love of our Savior Jesus Christ. Here are just a few:

- In Matthew 9:12-13 Jesus declared *"It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. 'But go and learn what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*
- The two blind men on the road from Jericho who called out to Jesus: *"Lord, we want our eyes to be opened. And moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed Him."* (Matthew 20:33-34)
- The man with leprosy who fell to his knees pleading for mercy, and saying to Jesus: *"If You are willing, You can make me clean."* And moved with compassion, He stretched out His hand, and touched him, and said to him, *"I am willing; be cleansed."* And immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed." (Mark 1:40-42)
- When Jesus went into the city of Nain and saw the dead son of the widow being carried out and the pain that the woman was in; *"When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother."* (Luke 7:13-15)

I believe that one of the greatest examples of God's awesome compassion and love for all of humanity lies in the miracle of the Incarnation, when Jesus, the Son of God came into the world; God Himself stepped into history and took on flesh! Can you imagine – lowering yourself as the Creator of the Universe , highest Being of everything – stepping down to take on flesh and do everything that humans do – short of sinning. Everything; being hungry, having to find the 'facilities' – everything! God took on flesh – He came into the word – God stepped into

history. No one understands better than Jesus of Nazareth what it means to be human, being susceptible to temptation and death. Please listen to these words from the Gospel of John; you are all familiar with them – you have heard me say them a thousand times - *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”* (John 3:16-17)

Jesus Christ coming into the world demonstrates the most absolutely incredible show of compassion for all mankind. Remember *splagchnizomai* – that deepest inner feeling - your gut – for someone else? How did He do that? He did that:

- by taking our punishment upon Himself;
- by taking our place;
- by paying the price for our sins.

He didn't stand by and let us figure it out for ourselves – but instead Jesus felt from the depths of His being - the compassion and love that knows no limit – and by His stripes, His scourging, and His wounds – His very death – *“we are healed.”* (Isaiah 53:5) No one can possibly know the agony that Jesus went through – and thanks be to God - because we have faith in Him and His forgiveness – we never will! He took that threat away from us – and all we have to do is say please and thank you! A lot of times we ask but we never say ‘thank you.’

In today's Gospel, Jesus, after healing all of the sick people who came to Him, told His disciples that the people did not need to leave Him, but instead He asked the disciples to give the people something to eat. All they could muster up was – five loaves and two fish. There were no Hungry Howie's, nothing like that. The Apostles said why can't we tell them to go into the towns and buy something to eat. Jesus told them *“you give them something to eat!”* (Matthew 14:16. All they can muster up is five loaves and two fish. Isn't it interesting that five and two total seven – the perfect divine number? Jesus blessed and broke them and then told His disciples to distribute the pieces among all those people present. Before their very eyes what had been blessed and broken - filled and satisfied a huge number of people. The Gospel tells us that five thousand men were fed, but then there were women and children too! If you had 5,000 families of three there that day– that would mean that fifteen thousand people were miraculously fed! Not just fed – but satisfied. But wait – there's more to look at – the five loaves and two fish produced twelve baskets of leftovers! This isn't just the feeding of the five thousand – but look deeper at it - there is a rich meaning: think about it - twelve disciples – twelve tribes of Israel, and twelve baskets of leftovers. God is always trying to say ‘look, look – there is meaning here!’

At the beginning of our Gospel lesson we see Jesus looking to be alone; some alone time; seeking solitude but instead He was finding only people in need. I want to suggest to you that at the end of Jesus' life on earth - it was He who might have needed the company of people – but instead Jesus was left all alone, forsaken, and left to hang on the hard wood of the cross. When the crowds were in need they wouldn't leave Jesus alone, but when He was in trouble –

only a handful stood by mercifully weeping. I think this is significant, because when it is our darkest hour – Christ stands with us: to love and support us, to stand in the gap with us, to “*never leave us nor forsake us.*” (1 Kings 8:57) **Jesus Christ knows better than anyone what it means to be human, to endure hardship, hunger, temptation, and pain – and He stands with us:**

- When we feel alone;
- when we feel forsaken;
- when we are hurting;
- when the enemy is taunting us with whatever is our weakness;
- Jesus is with us – and He will help us through – if we let Him!

His shoulders are much broader than ours, and He doesn’t want us to carry any burden alone. Jesus wants us to invite Him to walk with us, to take the load and lighten ours.

Several weeks ago, I wrote about the yoke and the oxen – and I want to repeat that verse which reveals so much about the compassion – *splagchnizomai* - of our Lord Jesus. Jesus said: “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*” (Matthew 11:28-30)

When everything else seems dark, when we are filled with distress or mourning, grief or pain, then we must give it to Jesus and feel His compassion and love – which know no limits. He will not tell you to leave or get out of the way; instead He offers Himself to you; He offers healing – emotionally, physically, and spiritually. He will help you to endure – in and through His compassion, mercy and love. The author of Hebrews reminds us of Christ’s compassionate love: “*For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*” (Hebrews 2:17-18) Let me just clarify one thing about that word – atonement. At-One-Ment – bringing together, to fix the relationship that had been broken by sin. Atonement – at – one – ment - we are restored!

My friends, we can take great comfort in the words from Hebrews. I urge you to accept His compassion, mercy and love today. It is a free gift with no strings attached and Jesus offers that to you today – we only need to accept it, along with His compassion and His great love. Now THAT is a Savior!