

Wesley United Methodist Church

August 6, 2017

“Compassion.”

Matthew 14:13-21

A few years ago, flight attendants for Southwest Airlines began spicing up their instructions to passengers with humor. Soon other airlines followed suit. After all, why talk to passengers when they're not listening? Here are a couple of classics.

One flight attendant began her routine this way, “In the event of sudden loss of cabin pressure, masks will descend from the ceiling. Stop screaming, grab the mask, and pull it over your face. If you have small children with you, secure your mask before assisting with theirs. If you are traveling with more than one small child, pick your favorite.

Another attendant concluded a flight like this. “As you exit the plane, make sure to gather all of your belongings. Anything left behind will be distributed equally amongst flight attendants. Please do not leave children or spouses.”

On a Delta flight, the pilot announced that one passenger had left his belt and his jacket at the security check point. “Pick it up today,” he said, “or look for them tomorrow on eBay.”

Educator Parker Palmer was en route to a conference when the plane he was on made an unexpected long layover at an airport. A truck that was supposed to deliver the refreshments for the next leg of the journey, broke down. Finally, the pilot decided that it was more important to get his passengers on their way than to wait for the snacks to arrive, so he took off.

As soon as they were in the air the passengers started grumbling. “A ticket is a contract,” one said loudly, and snacks are part of the contract.” “I ought to sue,” said another. Then a man stood up and said, “I'm a lawyer. How many are willing to join in a class action suit?” A minor mutiny was in the works.

Then something interesting happened. A flight attendant came on the public-address system. She began with the familiar information, “Ladies and gentlemen, the captain has turned off the seat belt sign. We have now attained a cruising altitude of 30,000 feet.” Then she said something quite extraordinary: “Having served many of you on the first leg of this flight, I know some of you still have your bags of peanuts, which you stuffed into your pocket. Please open them and share them with the people around you. I'm sure some of you have mints. Would you pass these around also? Those of you with newspapers, you can only read one section at a time. Spread the other sections around for others to read. Some of you are parents or grandparents. Take out the pictures of your children or grandchildren and show them to others.” With that brief statement, she changed the emotional climate of the flight.

Later, when the attendant was near Parker Palmer's seat, he asked her, “What's your name? And what's your supervisor's name? I want to write a letter of commendation. That was the best example of group leadership I've ever seen.” To which she replied, “The loaves and fishes still work.”

Do you know what she was referring to? There are many scholars who believe this is exactly what happened when Jesus fed the great multitude with only five barley loaves and two small fish. People shared with one another.

You heard the story. An enormous crowd of people had followed Jesus out into the wilderness. Evening was approaching. Jesus knew that the crowd would be getting hungry. “Send them away,” advised Jesus' disciples. “Let them go into the villages to buy food for themselves.” “That's not necessary,” Jesus said, “we can supply them with food.” Well, you can imagine the disciples' surprise when he said that. “That's absurd,” they probably thought. “We barely have enough for us.” One of the disciples, Philip, remarked that it would be more than half a year's wages to feed a crowd like this. It was out of the question. But another disciple, Andrew, had noticed a young boy in the crowd and he had five barley loaves and two fish.

Please understand that five barley loaves is not the same as having five loaves of bread. The loaves were rather small like little sandwich rolls. The fish were little salt fish like sardines. But they weren't inadequate. Five rolls and two tiny fish are plenty in the Master's hand. Indeed, when they were finished distributing the food, twelve baskets full were left over. How did this happen? How did the Master feed so many with so little?

Some scholars believe that the crowd brought food with them, but kept it concealed until this small boy offered to share his lunch and the others followed suit. This is the principle to which the flight attendant was referring. When we share, the amount available seems to multiply. You know, if you ever been to our church covered dish or potluck, there is always food left over.

Most of us don't really care how he did this with only five barley loaves and two tiny fish. What is important to us is what this story says to us about Christ.

First of all it tells us about Christ's compassion. In fact, the first thing we read in this story is that Jesus, seeing the large crowd of people, "had compassion on them..." But we expect that. Jesus came with one purpose and desire, to seek and save the lost. When he gazed over Jerusalem, he wept with compassion. He knew heartaches, headaches, and the hungers that go with being human. And he still has compassion. He still weeps over the plight of his people. He has compassion because he has been where we are, doubted, denied, betrayed, and broken in body. So, when we hurt, he understands, for he has been hurt too.

A man named Al Wiener survived the NAZI concentration camps of World War II. He entered a labor camp when he was 15. Years in those camps took their toll. Over time his weight dropped to 80 pounds and he was weak and always hungry. He was slowly starving to death.

In one labor camp, he worked in a textile factory. There were German women who worked in the textile factory. They were forbidden from speaking to prisoners like Al. They were not even allowed to look him in the eye. One day a German woman pointed, motioning for Al to go to another part of the room. Al waited until no one was looking and he went to the spot she had picked out. She pointed to a crate and walked away. Al lifted the crate and found a sandwich. A precious, precious sandwich. How we take such riches for granted. Al ate the sandwich quickly while no one was looking. Every day for two months the woman left a sandwich under that crate for him. She risked her life for him. Al says her sandwiches probably saved his life.

What would the world be without compassionate people, people who are willing to feel the pain of those less fortunate than themselves? Compassion is a gift from God. You know, no one had more compassion than Jesus of Nazareth who lay down his life for sinful humanity.

Another thing we need to see is that Jesus is capable. Our needs may be physical or emotional or spiritual, but Christ's power is sufficient.

This may be the point at which many of us are missing the joy of our faith. We believe that God cares about us and our need, but we don't really believe that he is able to help us. And so we lead joyless, powerless lives. We need to see that we have a God who not only cares about our needs but is capable of meeting those needs.

There is one more thing that needs to be said. What if that young boy had not been willing to share his five loaves and two fish? Jesus would still have found a way to feed the multitude, but it does seem that Christ works best when he has something to work with. It may be fishes and bread, mud to make someone see, turn water to wine, but it's obvious that God likes something to work with.

Christ has compassion for our needs. And he is able to meet our needs. But Christ needs something to work with. Look at your life right now. Do you have a need? Christ can meet that need. Is there something that you need to place in his hands first, something you can help the situation? Look at the needs of those around you. Does someone you know have a need? God can meet that need. Is there something you can offer to God to work with? I suspect that we all have five loaves and two fish to give to God to work with. Then let's see the amazing things God can do. Amen.