**July 19, 2015 – 8th Sunday after Pentecost**

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Today’s Gospel reading is a little strange. It’s kind of like reading the first and last page of a novel, but skipping the middle. What we skipped today were two of Jesus’ most showy miracles, the feeding of the five thousand and walking on water.

But never fear, we’ll hear John’s version of those events next week so today we can focus on what’s on those outside pages. I think sometimes that we tend to lose some of the subtler ideas when we’re dazzled by God’s greatness in miracle form.

After our brief interlude with Herod and John the Baptist, we’re back with Jesus and the disciples, who have returned from their mission trips with tales of healing and teaching in the villages of Galilee. And with that return we get an up close and personal glimpse of Jesus’ loving and compassionate heart. Since our goal is to try to be like Jesus in every way, this is an important lesson for us.

When the disciples return from their journey, they’re eager to tell Jesus all about it. But Jesus’ first concern is for their welfare. “Come away and rest awhile,” he tells them. But if you remember from the Gospel of a couple of weeks ago, Jesus wasn’t exactly sitting around twiddling his thumbs while they were gone. After his rejection at Nazareth, he spent the time traveling as well, teaching and healing. But he’s only thinking of his disciples’ welfare here. Even though he might be sitting still while they’re all resting, he will still be listening to and encouraging his disciples as they decompress. And listening to twelve excited people talk all at once is no restful task!

And then there were the crowds. They area where they were traveling is not really that big. The whole Sea of Galilee is only thirteen miles long and eight miles wide, so getting from town to town, even on foot, is no big deal. For instance, Google Maps tells us that to walk from Tiberias, where Herod lived and presumably had John killed, to Capernaum, which was sort of base camp for Jesus and his disciples, would only take about three and a half hours. Even allowing for poorer walking conditions in the first century, it would not be that long of a walk. Although how they could have found their way around without Google Maps is beyond me!

We don’t know exactly where Jesus and the disciples sailed to at first. In the text it’s just called a deserted place and since a good chunk of the region is pretty empty, that’s not very helpful. But wherever they went, they were found pretty quickly by the crowds, who came from all around as word spread about the boat’s destination.

And the text says that Jesus, even though he saw a huge crowd waiting for him in this so-called deserted place, still went ashore because he had compassion on them. The word for compassion is one of the favorite words of any student of Biblical Greek. It’s *splangchnizomai*. It comes from the root *splangchnon*, which means “the inward parts; the heart, affections, seat of the feelings.”

So *splangchnizomai* means to have pity or compassion from the depths of your heart for someone. And that’s what Jesus had for the crowds. His heart went out to them, even though he was probably bone-weary and heartsick about his reception in Nazareth and about the death of his cousin and friend, John. And tired and sad as he was, he spoke with them and taught them because he saw them as sheep without a shepherd.

This is the kind of compassion we are called to have for others. Compassion that comes from the deepest part of our being. Compassion that isn’t merely a feeling, but which results in loving action. But in order to feel and act on this compassion, we have to open our hearts to the needs of others. We have to let them into our lives. We have to go ashore and meet them, messy and inconvenient as that might be for us.

Keep that in mind as we fast forward past the miracles that we’ll hear about next week. In that section they land at Bethsaida, which is located on the northeast coast of the Sea of Galilee. They don’t stay there long, though, before they hop in the boat again and finally fetch up across the sea again at Gennesaret, on the west coast between Tiberias and Capernaum. And as they sail back and forth across the sea, larger and larger crowds gather wherever they land.

It could seem almost comical, what with Jesus and the disciples sailing back and forth and the crowds running around the tip of the lake back and forth after them. Comical except that these crowds are in desperate need. They need Jesus. They need him to lead them, to teach them, and to heal them. They need him to love them. And he does, time and time again.

This is the other thing that we learn from this short, simple passage. That Jesus’ love for us is boundless and that we really, really need it. The people in this story understand, like the hemorrhaging woman in a previous passage did a couple of weeks ago, that Jesus could heal them, even if they could only get near enough to him to touch his coat.

Here’s where we need to be like Jesus AND be like the crowd. We need to let God’s love and compassion flow through us, but at the same time we need to recognize our need for him. The first thing is hard enough to accomplish on most days, but the second is really difficult.

In 2015, it’s not easy to show that we need anything or anybody, much less Jesus. We can do it on our own, without any help. Pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Has anyone ever stopped to think how impossible that is, and how silly it is to try?

Jesus’ followers understood that they needed him, even though they might not have had a sophisticated theology to back it up. They saw God at work and they knew they needed to be part of that. We, with our independent pioneer spirit have a hard time accepting that, but it’s as true for us as it was for those first century Galileans.

We need God in our lives not the least because God the origin of love and compassion. If we can love one another, it’s because God loved us first. If we can feel deep compassion for the plight of others, it’s because God felt compassion for us first. God designed us with open hearts to both give and receive that love and compassion.

Let’s join those crowds on the shores of Galilee and reach out to touch Jesus and be healed – healed of hardness of heart, healed of loneliness, and healed of our independence from God. And then, with our hearts opened, we can follow Jesus in true compassion and Godly love for all of God’s people. Including ourselves.

Amen.