

Years ago, a farmer was plowing during the spring thaw. There were many muddy, low spots in his field. Chugging into one particularly wet place, the farmer’s tractor got stuck. The harder he tried, the deeper he was stuck. Finally, he walked over to his neighbor’s place to ask for assistance. The neighbor came over, investigated the situation, shook his head, and said, “It doesn’t look good, but I’ll tell you what. I’ll give pulling you out a try, but if we don’t get your tractor out, I’ll come and sit in the mud with you!” Compassion is sitting in the mud with a friend, having their pain in your heart.

Compassion is what Jesus had for the crowds that day on the sea of Galilee. The disciples had just returned from their missionary expedition. It had been exciting and exhausting for them as demons were cast out of troubled souls and sinners were called to salvation. So successful had Jesus’ message been that now he and the disciples were being besieged by needy people. They had no time to call their own. Those who think that our age has a monopoly on the rat race need only look at the gospel to know Jesus understands the speed and pressure of our lives. He certainly understood the pressures that were coming to bear upon the disciples. With compassion for them, he makes a suggestion: “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” So the disciples, with their Teacher, set out for a much-needed retreat.

Launching a boat, they head away from the crowds. It was a time designed for restoration and relaxation. It would have worked, except for one thing. The sea of Galilee, around which much of Jesus’ ministry was taking place, is not much of a sea. It’s not the size of an ocean or even one of our Great Lakes. People on the shore could easily identify Jesus, plot the destination of his boat, and with quick-footed action be there on shore to welcome him when he docked.

Imagine the scene. Jesus and his disciples land at the beach and are greeted by a great crowd. Later that day, the Lord will miraculously feed about 5000 men; add to that a fair amount of women and children and we near 10,000 people expecting... Well, they didn’t know exactly what they were expecting. And Jesus, tired Jesus, mourning Jesus, worn out Jesus, had compassion on every one of those 10,000. He does not say come back tomorrow. He doesn’t hide or run away from them. He doesn’t explain to them how badly he needs a holiday. He has compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

God’s leaderless people were in pain. Think of the pain Jesus saw as he looked into those hearts. The Lord of love took compassion on the mothers who had buried children. He was touched by the widows and widowers mourning the loss of a lifetime companion. He felt the sadness of the man whose business was failing, the father whose children had wandered, the young person looking for acceptance, the broken-hearted suitor. He felt the pain of those lives ruined by gossip, those unjustly accused, those whose days had been misspent and misled. He had compassion on them all.

But do not think of God’s compassion as something that was Once Upon a Time, long ago. It’s not just for those 10,000 people. Jesus has compassion for you as well as those who

lived within his own era. Jesus has your pain in his heart. Jesus had your eternal pain in his heart when he was born into this world to take your place under the law. Jesus showed compassion for you when he spent his life seeking and saving the lost. He showed compassion when he called you by name and made you a member of his of his family through the washing of holy baptism. Jesus showed compassion when he promised to be with you to never forsake you to listen to your prayers. All these things Jesus does not because you're good looking or well behaved or better than others, but because he sees how totally and absolutely lost you are without him.

What burdens you today? Jesus knows your hidden hurts, those wounds you keep secret from everyone. As your shepherd with divine power and might, he wishes to heal those hurts they are important to him. Don't think they are too large for him to conquer. He who dealt with death and won eternal life can conquer your problems as well. Large or small, Jesus has your pain in his heart; Jesus has such compassion for you that it led him to a cross, to pay an enormous debt for you. He knew we didn't have the resources. So he paid with His life.

With the sacrificial compassion of Jesus in view, it is clear we should have compassion on other people. As our thoughts dwell on Jesus, we receive the courage to care as he did. We will run the risk of being hurt and perceived as foolish. As believers we will wrestle with indifference and apathy and begin to reach out, even though that reaching may bring a cross to our lives. Like Jesus, from Jesus, we will believe that compassion finds a way to serve when indifference would find an excuse.

A Christian person on a mission trip to India tells the story of touring a region racked by severe poverty. And we'll pick their story here:

“Of all the things I saw, one stands out. A little child, a girl I think, was playing in the trash. She had no shoes, her face was filthy. Someone commented, “How is it possible for her mother to let her live that way? It's deplorable.” The leader of our group, who came from that neighborhood, said, “That little girl is dearly loved by her mother, but her mother has no knowledge of or love for soap. You have knowledge of and love for soap, but no love for the little girl. Until love for soap and love for the little girl come together in the same person, she is likely to stay as she is.”

Friends in Christ, we all know people who are sad that the world is in dire straits. And we all know people who love Jesus. But until sadness for the world and love for Jesus come together in a compassionate individual and a caring church, the world and the lost souls in it are likely to remain the same. I don't want that. I know you don't either. So, Saint Mark, let us deal compassionately with the people in our lives, and if necessary, sit in the mud with them for a while, until they are lifted out by the strong arm of Jesus.