***Until Compassion and Wisdom Embrace***

A Sermon Based on Mark 6:30-34

Lawrence Park Community Church, Feb 24, 2019

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In this morning’s scripture reading, Mark writes that Jesus was so exhausted by preaching that he tried to escape the crowds that followed him wherever he went. Jesus hops on a boat and goes by sea. But the crowds go by land, and racing as fast as their feet will take them, they run all the way around the large lake. So, Jesus’ escape is unsuccessful. When Jesus’ boat arrives, the crowds are already at the far shore waiting for him.

So, then what? Does Jesus make another run for it? No.

Does Jesus decide to heal the crowds? No. This is not one of Mark’s many odd healing stories.

So, does Jesus feed the crowds? No, at least not right away. The miracle-story about feeding 5000 concludes our scripture reading, but it isn’t the first thing Jesus does when the crowds corner him.

Actually, Mark says that, seeing "a large crowd [Jesus] had *compassion* on them.” The compassion doesn’t really surprise us anymore, two thousand years later. We know this story, after all. We have come to expect compassion from Jesus. Compassion is what he does. But it is worth stopping for a moment, anyway, because as told in the Greek, and as related to the children a few minutes ago, this compassion is poignant.

The Greek word for compassion is *esplagxnisthey*. It is an onomatopoeic word that sounds like what it means. So, just as saying *esplagxnisthey* ties your tongue in knots, the word means “my insides are all tied in knots and it hurts.” (Hold up poster, ask congregation to “repeat after me”.) That’s compassion. A sick feeling inside not for yourself, but for someone else; it is love that hurts. Compassion, the English word, is derived from two Latin words that mean, “suffering with.”

So, picture Jesus for a minute. He's standing on a hill. But he’s exhausted. Still, people stretch out as far as he can be heard. "Like sheep without a shepherd," says Mark. Times are tough. Soldiers occupy their country. Public crucifixions line the main through-fares and give kids nightmares. Everyone has PTSD. Meanwhile, Jewish tax collectors in league with the foreign occupiers rob everyone. All the little land-owning farmers have lost their land and became day labourers. And their religious leaders, the Pharisees, are trying to convince them that what matters most in this situation is that you must obey every jot and tittle of their religious purity laws.

Jesus is standing on a hill. Exhausted. And seeing the crowds, Jesus is pained, full of their pain. He is suffering on their behalf.

And so, filled with compassion, what does Jesus do? Fight the Romans and end crucifixion? Call down angels in F-16 fighter jets? Round up the tax-collectors to take back what they stole? Do a land-reform miracle that restores the farms to the peasants? Call a General Council meeting to reorganize the synogogues? Does he feed them first?

No. Jesus does none of these things. Instead, Mark says, “Filled with compassion, *Jesus began teaching them many things*.

Huh? In the midst of all these existential crises, when it seems like the whole world is falling apart and nothing is sure anymore, Jesus wants to teach, first?

And yet this is how it always is for Jesus. He spent years preaching parables and revealing mysteries before he ever made that last deadly, trip to Jerusalem. Jesus’ life is not just about his death and whatever mysterious thing happened afterwards—Jesus’ life was actually, in large measure, about passing on his wisdom, the key to knowledge, on account of his compassion for people.

So, Jesus taught that the first shall be last, that the poor are rich, that cheeks must be turned, and that we should not judge. Jesus taught us that those who mourn will, one day, laugh; that those who live by the sword will die by the sword: and that God, wherever he is above us or among us, will always wait patiently for us, even if we’ve gone to a far country and ruined our lives.

Jesus had compassion, so he taught them wisdom. The relationship between compassion and wisdom is like that between body and soul. You can’t have life with just one or the other—you need a functioning body and soul to live. Similarly with compassion and wisdom. You can’t have real life without both. You can’t have heart without brains and remain whole. Compassion and wisdom must embrace in each of our lives if we are going to make this world—our world—a better place.

But why exactly do wisdom and compassion need to embrace?

**Because, without wisdom**, without the teaching and example of Jesus impressed upon our minds, compassion is naïve and ineffective, a bystander to injustice. Without wisdom, compassion agonizes over Climate Change but is paralyzed to do anything constructive. Without wisdom we are busy but ineffective. Without wisdom nothing ultimately changes and our compassion is never more than a sick feeling always on the brink of giving way to despair.

**On the other hand, without compassion**, wisdom always threatens to become little more than technical know-how, which can be used as easily to justify more efficient weapons of mass destruction as it can be used to feed and clothe the homeless. Without compassion, the teachings of the church become divisive occasions for a bad fight. Without compassion, wisdom devolves into pragmatism about what is best for me, myself and I, rather than what is best for me and my neighbours and this planet.

**But when compassion and wisdom embrace** people focus on what they can do locally that might make a difference globally. When compassion and wisdom embrace, bodies politic look out for the common good rather than just for the national interest or resource extraction giving big engineering firms a free pass. When compassion and wisdom embrace, Liberal Christians like us think longer and harder about the example of Jesus than we think about the doctrine of Jesus’ two natures in one divine person. When compassion and wisdom embrace, we prioritize on behalf of all rather than just for ourselves.

Look. We live in dangerous times. There are many reasons why this is so. Our consumer society is wasteful of resources and finds it difficult to hold corporations or nations responsible, or to make consumers pay for the true cost of their products, once you factor in cleaning the environment, emptying the oceans of plastics, or the die off of bees.

We live in dangerous times. Most political rhetoric is disheartening, always shouting, tweeting, always in our news feeds, always partisan, always seeking to knock the other person down to win a short-term political advantage.

We live in dangerous times. Where are the lawyers who spend a lifetime trying to understand what justice is, and who then use that wisdom to change the world, like Ghandi or Mandela did? Where are the preachers who, after sitting for years at Jesus’ feet in some seminary, go to jail to live the old, old story? Like Martin Luther King.

We live in dangerous times, where antisemitism is on the rise, where new Canadians of Arabic origin are sometimes scorned, sometimes feared, and where cries to block our border to refugees are starting to sound a lot like they do in the USofA. Where are the Viola Desmond amongst us? She wasn’t educated like King or Gandhi, but she was wise. In 1946, a movie theatre in New Glasgow refused to sell her a movie ticket for the main floor, which was reserved for white folks. So, she bought a balcony ticket and sat downstairs anyway, until she was arrested. And Canada’s modern civil rights movement followed.

Oh, I know. Individually we don’t always have the wisdom to make our compassion real and effective. And we can’t all be famous. We can’t all be heroes who make it to the ten-dollar bill. But here’s a bit of homespun wisdom from me. If you are compassionate, like Jesus, then somewhere in your little corner of the world you are going to find in Jesus’ example and his teachings a wise and wonderful way for you to make a difference at whatever you do, at least for the one you are with. And in a dangerous world, making a difference for one is the necessary first step to becoming a shepherd in a world that has lost its way.