

6 August 2006
Pentecost 9

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Great Compassion”

Text: Mark 6:30-34 (Jeremiah 23:1-6; Ephesians 2:13-22)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The apostles were tired and weary. They needed a rest. Last week we heard that Jesus sent them out ahead of Him two by two. And they went as per Jesus’ instructions – with no bread, no bag, no money, and with only the clothes on their backs. They preached repentance, cast out demons, and healed many who were sick. (Mk 6:7-13) We’re not told how long they were gone, but now that they have returned and report to Jesus all that happened, they need a rest. Probably not only *physically* tired, but also *mentally* exhausted. (And I know what they felt like, having just returned from vacation myself!) So Jesus takes them by boat across the Sea of Galilee to a desolate place – a desert, wilderness place, with nobody around, so that they can rest with Him and in Him. And the thought must have sounded like music to the ears of these weak and weary apostles!

But when they arrive in the “desolate” place, they find out it isn’t so desolate at all! The hordes have gotten there ahead of them, and the sweet music of rest is replaced by a cacophony of cries for help. And they look at Jesus . . . what should they do? *What would He do?*

We’ll get to that in a moment. You already know from hearing the Gospel a few moments ago, of Jesus’ compassion. But we mustn’t jump there too quickly. We first need to think about *ourselves*, and what *we* would do in that situation. We need first take a few moments and think about our compassion, your compassion.

For what would I have done when, after arriving last week in the Outer Banks (my own desolate place!) – instead of the rest with my family that I expected, there had been a whole horde of people asking me to teach and preach and listen and counsel and help and serve!? *I think I know the answer, and it’s not a good one. . . .* But perhaps I could be excused because it was my vacation. What about my compassion the other 50 weeks of the year? Do I fare any better? Because there are hordes all around us crying for help. Am I compassionate? And not just in my heart, but in my actions? And not just as a pastor, but as a Christian? Well, *sometimes* yes! Sometimes I’ll give to a beggar, or hold

a door for someone, or offer my help, or give up my seat on the Metro. But how many times? One out of ten? Two, or *even four* out of ten? That's still not even half! And these aren't even weighty or difficult things! And then when I do manage to do something compassionate, you know what happens? My pride sets in, wanting thanks for my act of *gallantry*. Or I please myself by thinking how much better I am than all those around me who did nothing. Or my sinful nature kicks in, and I feel resentment – for being put out, or even for those people being there in need and imposing on me in the first place! And whatever good I might have done is ruined. And when I'm tired, it gets even worse. I get less compassionate, and more selfish. I know what I *should* do, how I *should* be, but I don't, and I'm not. . . . *What about you?*

And I wonder if those tired and weary apostles felt the same way when they arrived on the other side of the Sea of Galilee . . . and saw the needy hordes waiting for them there. A little resentment maybe? Or jealousy, or selfishness, for imposing on their rest time? If they're anything like me, like us . . .

When St. Paul wrote in the Epistle (Eph 2:13, 17) about those “*who once were far off*” . . . we usually think this means *other* people. But you know what? It's me. And you. Our love fails. Our compassion fails. We fail. Our thoughts, words, deeds, and desires (or lack thereof!) make us *far off* the mark, and *far off* from our Lord.

But St. Paul also said something very important in that little phrase: you who *once* were far off. You who *at one time* were *far off* in sin and rebellion, but who *have now been brought near by the blood of Christ*. (Eph 2:13) You see, a change has taken place. For where our compassion fails, Paul wants you to know, the compassion of God does not. The compassion of our Father in His Son, Jesus Christ is sure, and true, and never-ending. It does not – it *cannot* – fail. . . .

Which brings us back to the shore of the Sea of Galilee that day, and the hordes of people, and the weak and weary apostles. They looked at Jesus . . . *what would He do?* Jesus has *compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd*. Jesus has compassion on *them*, the crowds . . . but also I think *them*, the apostles, as well. So that *all* His sheep be taken care of. Jesus feeds them all with His Word, and all rest.

The prophet Jeremiah had proclaimed that this would happen, that the Lord Himself would come and shepherd His people in care and compassion. “*Behold, the days are coming,*” declared Jeremiah (Jer 23:5) – and indeed, that day had come. David's descendant, the *righteous Branch*, had come to do what only He could do: gather His people, atone for their sins, feed them with His Word, and give them a perfect care and compassion not tainted by sin. The ones far off are now being brought near – not through their own

efforts to draw near to God! – but because the Lord has come near to them. In fact, as near and as close as could possibly be: God and man in the one person of Jesus Christ. ***One new man in place of the two, making peace.*** (Eph 2:15) Having compassion.

And so it is that day along the Sea of Galilee in that desolate place. Compassion, peace, comfort, rest, feeding, forgiveness, Word, and life. All that is needed is there. For God is there. For God had compassion. For God sent His Son.

And so it is here, today, for this horde, in this desolate place. The same compassion, peace, comfort, rest, feeding, forgiveness, Word, and life is here, **for the same Lord is here.** As Jeremiah promised, He Himself will come and do it. Even at their best, our friends and neighbors will fail us; our family and fellow Christians will fail us; your pastor will fail you. But your Lord, your Saviour, will never fail you. And so whatever desolate place you find yourself in – the desolation from loneliness, from addiction, from fear, from turmoil, from uncertainty, from emptiness, from anger, from resentment, from weakness, from weariness, from busy-ness, and how many more? Whatever the desolate place, our Lord has come to make it desolate no more. To bring the water of baptism and life to the desert of sin and death. To bring the food of His body and blood to the hunger of our souls. To bring the comfort and consolation of His forgiveness to the fear and rebellion of our hearts and minds. To bring His cross, and the compassion of His cross, into our far off lives, that we who once were far off, may be far off no more. And not only be brought near to God, but actually be *joined* to God – you in Christ and Christ in you – one body, one flesh. That what God has joined together, man may not separate.

For this, we have done nothing. Our repentance is only our acknowledgement that we are far off, but can bring us no closer to God. Our peace is in the compassion of God. His compassion that drove Him to promise a Saviour, to send prophets to proclaim His promises, and then to send His Son to be that Saviour. To send His Son – *in compassion* – to go to the cross, to atone for our sins and die our death. To, as St. Paul preached, ***“kill the hostility”*** (Eph 2:16) that was between us in His own death, and give us the peace of sins forgiven in His resurrection. That all that we have done is done! And all that He has done now given to us. That His resurrection be our resurrection, and His life our life.

And then in compassion, God sent His apostles to proclaim this promise fulfilled, and still today He sends His pastors, to preach this Word of compassion and life. In a desolate world, in desolate places, to people far off, that all might be brought near. Not because of what we do, but because of what our Saviour is doing. Because our Saviour is still here, still saving, still forgiving, that we not grow weary of doing good, and of telling all the world of His compassion and great love. For He is building us all into ***a holy temple in the Lord***, the Church, built on ***Christ as the cornerstone, and the foundation***

of the apostles and prophets. (Eph 2:20)

And so we weak and weary people have rest – for both body and soul. No matter where you are, no matter what your situation. For as we sang, “*Oh, how great is [His] compassion!*” (LW #364) So repent and wash, fill your ears with His wisdom and Word, and come to His table to eat of Him. For you are no longer sheep without a shepherd. Your Saviour is here in compassion to serve you, to refresh you, to forgive you, to bless you. All that is needed is here for you, for He is here **for you**.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.