But their plans are quickly derailed. The desperately needy people of the region see where Jesus is heading and run ahead of him. When the boat hits ground, there is a huge crowd waiting for Jesus. Although he is weary, Jesus is not annoyed that his much-deserved day off is being interrupted. He is not irritated that these people are unable to help themselves. He is not even frustrated that the need all around him is so enormous. No, Jesus has compassion for them (v. 34). He “suffers with” them. *The Compassion of the Christ*.

Henri Nouwen, in a book entitled, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*, explains how compassion works. “Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human. When we look at compassion this way, it becomes clear that something more is involved than a general kindness or tenderheartedness. It is not surprising that compassion, understood as suffering with, often evokes in us a deep resistance and even protest.”

Switching languages, we can go even deeper. Mark wrote his gospel in Greek, and the Greek word for compassion is more descriptive than the Latin word. It means to be moved by something so strongly that you feel it in your stomach, down in your gut. Jesus has a sympathetic awareness of the people’s distress, and he has a strong desire to alleviate it. He feels compassion not just in his heart, but deep in his core.

Mark tells us that Jesus has compassion because the people are “like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things” (v. 34). Jesus becomes their Good Shepherd, the one who invites the people “to sit down in groups on the green grass” (v. 39). Jesus is the Good Shepherd predicted by the prophets Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah, the one who teaches his people, provides them with food, and heals their sick and injured (vv. 34, 42, 53-56). “He will feed his flock like a shepherd,” promised Isaiah; “he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep” (40:11).

Our Good Shepherd has come to us in Jesus, and this is truly good news. But it leaves us with a set of questions to answer: Do *we* have the compassion of the Christ? Are we willing to “suffer with” the hurting people around us? Do we feel the compassion of Jesus in our gut?

Even though the United States is a wealthy country, 35 million Americans are unable to acquire enough food to meet their needs. Over 13 million households experienced food insecurity in 2019, a problem only made worse by the pandemic. Tragically, households with children are more likely to face hunger than households without children. When Jesus faces a hungry crowd, he feeds them. Simple as that. The only miracle Jesus performs in all four gospels is the feeding of hungry people. Jesus feels compassion and he acts on that feeling.

Remember the Little Free Libraries that were popular a few years ago? People would put these house-shaped boxes outside their homes, businesses, or churches and fill them with books for people to borrow. During the pandemic, people turned many of those libraries into Little Free Pantries. They stocked the pantries with canned goods and other non-perishable food, filling them with food for hungry neighbors to take. They saw and felt their neighbors’ need, and they acted on that feeling and filled that need. Such people acted with the compassion of the Christ.

Jesus also makes a point of healing people. After the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus and his disciples cross the Sea of Galilee again. When they land at Gennesaret, the people of the region recognize Jesus and bring the sick to wherever he is. In a variety of villages, cities, and farms, the sick beg to touch the fringe of his cloak. Mark tells us that all who touch it are healed (6:56). Jesus does his healing in villages, cities, and farms, among the rich and the poor, the undeserving and the deserving, young and old alike. All who encounter Jesus and touch his cloak are healed.

The cloak of Jesus is being touched in southwestern Virginia, where the Remote Area Medical Clinic dispenses free medical care to people who have no other options. Over the course of three days, thousands of people come to the Wise County Fairgrounds to be seen by physicians and dentists. About a third of the patients are unemployed, and the clinic is a last resort for people who cannot afford insurance or do not qualify for Medicaid. Some have teeth pulled, some have eye exams, some have painful joints examined, and some get help from a Christian counseling group. “This isn’t about politics,” said the governor of Virginia during a visit to the clinic. “It’s about people’s lives.” His comment led to a round of “Amens” from the people around him.

He is right! Healing is about people, not politics. When we offer medical care to the poor, support food pantries, work to end discrimination, or provide affordable housing in our communities, we are “suffering with” our neighbors in need. We are being part of the cloak of Jesus in the world today.

Our challenge is always to suffer with people, as Jesus does. Jesus looks around and sees that the people around him are sheep without a shepherd, so he teaches them, feeds them, and heals them (vv. 34, 44, 53-56). Wherever Jesus went, needy people “begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed” (v. 56). Jesus felt compassion deep in his gut and he helped everyone without prejudice and without asking why they needed help. There is much we can do to help as we join Jesus in feeling compassion deep in our gut. Our challenge is to assist people in the very same way, with the compassion of the Christ.

Prayer: **Jesus, our Good Shepherd, thank you for letting us work with you to share your joy with the world. Help us not take for granted the gift it is to share your gospel to the nations and to our neighbors. Help us have eyes to see the needs around us and to respond to those needs with joy and hope. We ask for the compassion to follow your inspiring example, to be your cloak of healing for the world. Help us to embrace and bring comfort to those suffering. Let us remember that each day that we help someone we are helping you. Amen.**

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**The Compassion of the Christ**

Sunday, July 18, 2021 Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

In 2004, Mel Gibson’s released a movie, *The Passion of the Christ,* whichmovie portrays the last hours of Jesus’ life. The movie did very well, grossing more than $600 million at the box office and earning three Academy Award nominations. Now Gibson is working on a sequel, called *The Passion of the Christ: Resurrection,* and focusing on the three days between the death and resurrection of Jesus. Actor Jim Caviezel, who will play Jesus again in the sequel, says that it is “going to be the biggest film in history. It’s that good.”

The word “passion” comes from the Latin word *passio,* which means “suffering.” We can easily forget this when we speak of romantic passion, or the passion that someone has for a hobby or a sport. But in our reading today, it is very important to remember that the root of the word passion is suffering. Mark writes that when Jesus encountered a large crowd, “he had compassion for them” (6:34). This verse comes not from the end of Jesus’ life, but from a time much earlier, when Jesus performed his ministry in the region called Galilee. A movie about this period would be called *The Compassion of the Christ.* Not Passion, but Com-passion.

Compassion is a significant word in Scripture. *Passio* means “suffering” and the prefix “*com”* means “with.” Put the two together and you get “with suffering” or “suffering with.” Jesus showed compassion towards the people, which means that he “suffered with” them. Jesus and his disciples are traveling the countryside, casting out demons and curing the sick. They are working so hard that they cannot find time to grab a bite to eat. So, Jesus gathers the disciples in a boat with him and they go to a deserted place across the Sea of Galilee where they hope to enjoy some rest and relaxation.