

Eighth Sunday of Pentecost

July 30, 2006

Mark 8:1-9

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Jesus Possesses the Perfect Combination of Compassion and Power

1. He has the compassion to feel our needs
2. He has the power to relieve our needs

^{NIV} Mark 8:1 During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said,² "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat.³ If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance."⁴ His disciples answered, "But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?"⁵ "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked. "Seven," they replied.⁶ He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and they did so.⁷ They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them.⁸ The people ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.⁹ About four thousand men were present.

Imagine how the incident described in today's Gospel lesson would have been different if Jesus had lacked compassion. Then, when he finished speaking to this large crowd out there in the region of the Decapolis, he would simply have waved good-bye and gone home to Capernaum. Without compassion, he would either not have realized or not have cared that these people were in a remote area, short of food and facing a long trip home. Their lack of food was *their* problem. Next time, plan better.

Or imagine how this incident would have been different if Jesus had compassion, but no power to act on his feeling of compassion. Without his divine power, Jesus would have been as short of options as his disciples seemed to think he was. It was a large crowd. It was a remote place. And even if there'd been a grocery store just over the

next hill, they didn't have the money to buy meals for 4000 people. That's three strikes. Without Jesus divine power, the crowd goes home hungry despite his compassion—and maybe some of them collapse before they get there.

But neither of these two scenarios took place because, as we see here, Jesus our Savior possesses the perfect combination of compassion and power. As we observe Jesus here, we see 1] that he has the compassion to feel our needs, and 2] he has the power to relieve our needs.

1. He has the compassion to feel our needs

Here in Mark 8 Jesus is teaching and healing in what is predominantly Gentile territory on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. Large crowds were coming to see and hear Jesus—and putting themselves in something of a fix by doing so. Jesus notes here that this particular crowd of people had been with him for three days. They had probably brought some provisions, but now they were running out and getting re-supplied wasn't easy. That's when Jesus said, "*I have compassion for these people.*"

"Compassion" and "sympathy" mean the same thing. One comes from the Latin, the other from the Greek. Both refer to an ability to feel the needs of other people. This particular word for compassion refers first of all to our internal organs like the heart and liver. For the ancients, these organs were the place where compassion originated. We still talk that way. We talk about our heart going out to someone, or about something tugging at our heart. This word for compassion also occurs at some significant places in the New Testament. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan saw that mugging victim lying by the side of the road and he had compassion on him. (Lk. 10:33) (NIV: "took pity on him") In the parable of the Prodigal Son, when the father sees his errant son coming home, the Bible says he was "**filled with compassion for him.**" (Lk. 15:20) As you'd expect, Jesus is the finest example of compassion there is. When he came to the village of Nain and saw a widow following as the coffin bearing her only son was being taken out for burial, Jesus' heart went out to her. (Lk. 7:13)

Now it's certainly true that compassion was what motivated Jesus to come to this earth on his mission of mercy in the first place. He saw that we were powerless to save ourselves and he took pity on us. In compassion he humbled himself to become Pontius Pilate's whipping boy and the object of God's anger at our sin. In compassion he

surrendered his life for us at the cross. In his compassion he has forgiven us all our sins. But here in today's Gospel lesson there isn't a word about how Jesus' compassion moved him to rescue us from our spiritual peril. This is all about Jesus providing for physical needs. People who had come to see and hear Jesus were presenting the most basic of needs: they were hungry. Jesus saw this and was moved by it.

Nothing's changed. Our physical needs are still a matter of concern to Jesus. The Bible tells us that we have a high priest who *does* sympathize with our weaknesses. A true human being himself, Jesus once did experience hunger and thirst and pain and fatigue, not to mention sorrow and grief. Some years ago while one of our presidents was touring a supermarket, he inquired about the barcode scanner at the checkstand. It was apparent that he had not seen one of these scanners in action, though they had become quite common. But his curiosity quickly became grounds for criticism because some said his lack of familiarity with something as common as a supermarket scanner showed that he was out of touch with the lives of average Americans.

Whether it was true or not of the president, it's clear that Jesus is not out of touch with us. He was the one who told us that our heavenly Father knows our needs. In fact, Jesus has a more accurate read on our needs than we do ourselves. The Savior who had compassion on the sick and the handicapped, the grieving and lepers, has not changed. Our needs still move Jesus to compassion. Our lives are testimony to his compassion. The food we eat, the clothes we wear, the homes we live in, are all from this compassionate Provider. He enables us to work and so provide for our families. He heals our bodies. He protects us from evil and defends us from danger. And he does all this not because we've earned it, but simply because of his compassion.

In the *Small Catechism* at the Fourth Petition of Lord's Prayer, Dr. Luther explores why Jesus would teach us to pray for our daily bread when it's apparent that the Father gives daily bread without our asking, even to wicked people. In other words, if God is so compassionate that he's going to provide for our physical needs anyway, why ask? Do you remember Luther's answer? He says, "**...but we pray in this petition that he would lead us to realize this and to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving.**" As we see Jesus giving thanks for the bread and fish before he distributes them, it reminds us to give thanks. Jesus is familiar enough with us to

know our penchant not only for forgetting the source of our blessings, but even for grumbling about what he does provide for us. Sinners that we are, we have a lifelong struggle with ingratitude on our hands. We easily begin to believe that *we* are the source of the good things in our lives or that God somehow owes us all this and therefore no thanks are due him. That's why we daily stand in need of repentance for the sin of ingratitude. And that's why our compassionate Savior daily refreshes us with the word of the forgiveness he purchased for us.

Not only is Jesus an example of compassion, he is also an example of thankfulness. As we see him standing over the seven loaves and the few small fish and hear him giving thanks, we learn a lesson. If the Lord who will shortly multiply these loaves pauses to give thanks for a simple meal of bread and fish, we certainly have reason to do so! Jesus doesn't require us to earn his compassion, but he does desire that we recognize that all we have is due to his compassion and he encourages us to give thanks for all that he so richly gives us. Our acts of compassion for fellow Christians, our expressions of sympathy for fellow human beings, are a wonderful way to say thank-you to God for his compassion.

I don't know the mechanics of this miracle. Did Jesus say a word or snap his finger and suddenly seven loaves became many more than that? We know that Jesus didn't run out of bread to break or fish to distribute until everyone had been fed, so that the people there that day had witnessed a powerful miracle. Only by a miracle could so many have been fed with what started out as so little. So we see here as well that Jesus has the power to relieve our needs.

2. He has the power to relieve our needs

Did you say to yourself as you heard the Gospel lesson today, "I thought Jesus fed 5,000 people, not 4,000"? You didn't hear wrong. Jesus did feed 5,000 earlier. Here he feeds 4,000. This feeding of the 4,000 takes place at a different location than the feeding of the 5,000, so it's clearly a separate incident. Besides, the evangelists Mark and Matthew record both miracles.

Knowing Jesus had already fed the 5,000 when the need to feed the 4,000 comes up, isn't it interesting to hear the disciples' response to Jesus' statement? Jesus says, "*I have compassion on these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.*" This statement by Jesus

was a perfect opportunity for one of the disciples to respond. "Jesus, you tested me last time we were in a situation like this and I didn't do very well. I thought we had no options. But this time I know better. I know that you can do whatever you want to do. You can make use of your divine power turn those seven loaves and those few small fish into enough to feed this whole crowd. I've seen you do it. I'm not worried. We've always got options when you're with us, Jesus." But that's not what they say. Here's what they say: *"But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?"*

There are some commentators who say it's uncharitable to conclude just from this statement that the disciples had not yet learned to trust that Jesus had the power to meet their needs. But you go farther on in this chapter and you find that when the disciples got into the boat to go back to the other side of the Sea of Galilee with Jesus, they forgot to take enough bread with them. They had only one loaf. While they're in the boat Jesus warned them to watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod. They didn't know what Jesus was talking about and thought it might be a reference to the fact that they didn't bring enough bread along. And that's when Jesus rebuked them. You would think that now, after two miraculous feedings of thousands of people, they would have learned that not having enough bread is not a disaster when Jesus is along. **"Do you still not see or understand?"** Jesus asked them. And it was plain that they didn't—yet.

But the disciples aren't alone in this. Every one of us has had experience throughout our lives with God's gracious provision. We can remember times when we were worried about something, but our worries proved to be baseless. Jesus compassionately saw our need and met it. But then something new comes up: a big bill, an adverse test result, a concern that we won't have enough for retirement, or a concern that our fixed retirement income won't be sufficient. What do we do? Do we say, "Jesus, I've been down this road with you before. I thought the obstacle seemed insurmountable, but you saw me through. This time I'm just going to trust you to do what you promise you'll do." That would be the ideal response, but too often we still worry. We fret and get anxious as if Jesus weren't there, as if he hadn't seen us through our troubles in the past. So, it appears that in addition to repenting of our sin of ingratitude we might also repent of our failure to trust Jesus, of our inclination to face our problems as if we were facing them all alone. And as we confess our sins, our compassionate Savior responds by telling us that every sin, every reminder of our unbelief, has been submerged in the ocean of his love. We have been forgiven.

When you're starting down that path of worry, think about Jesus as he's feeding the 4,000. To the disciples it seemed as if there was no way of showing compassion for those hungry, tired people. But then Jesus took those seven loaves and just kept breaking pieces off and giving them to the disciples to distribute to the crowd until at last all 4,000 had eaten and were satisfied. Remember that God who fed the prophet Elijah at the Kerith ravine by having ravens deliver him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, is the God you call Father. Remember that God who fed the Israelites with manna during the whole course of their journey through the desert to the Promised Land, has promised to feed and defend and care for you, too. As King David said, **"The salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD; he is their stronghold in time of trouble. The LORD helps them and delivers them."** (Ps. 37:39-40)

I began this sermon by asking you to imagine a Jesus without compassion and then I asked you to imagine a powerless Jesus. But that was just an exercise designed to introduce the topic. We can take heart in knowing that our Savior is the perfect combination of compassion and power. Jesus has both the compassion to feel our needs and the power to relieve them. Amen.