

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 22, 2012**

**COMPASSION, INC.**

**Matthew 14:13-21**

If this were the TV game show *Jeopardy!* the answer would be: “Apart from the resurrection of Jesus, the only miracle recorded in all four of the New Testament Gospels.” The correct response, as you already know or may have guessed, is this: “What is the feeding of the five thousand?”

Of all the signs and miracles performed by Jesus, only the feeding of the five thousand is recounted in all four of the New Testament Gospels. Last Sunday we looked together at Jesus’ healing of ten lepers, only one of whom came back to say “thanks,” an account found only in the Gospel of Luke (17:11-19). Two weeks ago, on Easter Sunday, it was the raising of Lazarus from the dead, a dramatic demonstration of the power of Jesus over death, an event told only in the Gospel of John (11:1-48). None of the other miracles of Jesus is recorded in all four Gospels. Only this one. Only the feeding of the five thousand is found in each of the four New Testament Gospels. To be more accurate, it is probably more like the feeding of the *ten* thousand, or *fifteen* thousand or even *twenty* thousand, since the count of *five* thousand accounts only for the number of men who were present, but does not include all the women and children who were there as well.

It is a miracle that shows both the power of Jesus and the compassion of Jesus. I want to focus today on the compassion of Jesus and our calling as His followers to be people of compassion – people, as Paul writes in Colossians 3, who are to “dress in the wardrobe God has picked out” for us, a wardrobe that includes the garments of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and, above all, love (3:12-14).

Some of us, if we’re honest about it, are way too concerned with how we look. Our appearance. We are way too focused on what to wear and what not to wear. And we are way too quick to criticize others for what we judge to be their fashion faux pas. The wardrobe God is most concerned about, though, is the wardrobe of the heart, of which compassion is an essential part. As the Lord Himself said to Samuel in the Old Testament, “The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance” (which often includes the way a person is dressed) “but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). God cares far more about the wardrobe of your heart than about the clothes you’re wearing right now, or the clothes in your closet at home.

**REDISCOVERING JESUS**

Compassion is not simply something Jesus put on or took off, like a sweater or a tie or a pair of sandals. It is an inseparable part of who He is. But we may lose sight of who He is or what He is really like at times. Philip Yancey says it happened to him. In his book *The Jesus I Never Knew*, he writes about taking a fresh look at Jesus many years after becoming a Christian. He discovered that the Jesus he met in the pages of the New Testament “bore little resemblance to

the Mister Rogers (he) had met in Sunday School” – you know, safe, nice, comforting. I love Mister Rogers, but can you picture Jesus in a cardigan sweater and sneakers? Yancey continues: “He was remarkably unlike the person I had studied in Bible college. For one thing, He was far less tame.” It reminds me of Aslan, the Christ-figure in C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, when Lucy, one of the four children who had stumbled into Narnia through an old wardrobe, asked Mr. Beaver if Aslan was “safe.” “Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. “Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the king, I tell you.” That is how it is with Jesus. He’s not safe. But He is good. He is the true King. And He will never change.

More from Yancey: “In my prior image, I realized, Jesus’ personality matched that of a Star Trek Vulcan: He remained calm, cool, and collected as He strode like a robot among excitable human beings here on spaceship earth.” But that is not what Yancey found as he looked again at Jesus as He is portrayed in the Gospels. Instead, he found that “other people affected Jesus deeply. Obstinacy frustrated Him, self-righteousness infuriated Him, simple faith thrilled Him. He seemed more emotional and spontaneous than the average person, not less. More passionate, not less” (*The Jesus I Never Knew*, p. 23).

“Passionate,” I think, is a word that fits Jesus well. He was wildly passionate in His love for people. Especially people who were hurting or needy, weak or suffering, the outsiders and outcasts of society, people who knew they were sinners and needed a Savior, people who longed to know and honor God. Jesus demonstrated His passionate love in acts of kindness and compassion throughout His life. The miraculous feeding of the five thousand is just one example.

### **CONTEXT: THE DEATH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST**

Take a moment to look at the context of this miracle in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew 14 begins with the execution of John the Baptist, the fiery, feisty forerunner of Jesus, who was beheaded by Herod Antipas. You probably know the story. Herod divorced his wife in order to have a fling with Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. The Bible doesn’t tell us what either of them saw in the other (I guess we have to use our imaginations) but Herodias left her husband Philip and moved in with Herod. John the Baptist knew it was wrong and said so. And he landed in prison for his forthrightness. At a birthday party for Herod, the daughter of Herodias made such an impression when she danced for Herod and his guests that Herod, having drunk too much and thinking too little, promised with an oath to give her anything she wanted. Coached by her mother, the girl asked for John’s head, on a platter. That put Herod in a tight spot from which he couldn’t see a way out. Unwilling to lose face with his guests, because of his oath, Herod ordered John’s execution (Matthew 14:1-11).

After giving his body a proper burial, the disciples of John the Baptist went and told Jesus (14:12). When He heard the news, Jesus decided to get away from the crowds for a little “R&R.” But the crowds figured out where He was going, and they actually got there before He did. A huge crowd was waiting for Him when He arrived (14:13-14a).

## **MOVED WITH COMPASSION**

Notice: How did Jesus respond when He saw the crowd? With annoyance or, worse, anger? Did He view the large crowd as a nuisance, a bother to be gotten rid of as quickly as possible? Did He resent them for intruding on His personal time? No. Verse 14 says: “He had compassion on them.” He was “moved with compassion” for them.

The New Testament word for “compassion” literally means “to suffer with” or “to suffer alongside.” The dictionary defines compassion as “a suffering with another.” It is “an awareness of the need or suffering or distress of another, combined with the desire to alleviate it.” It is not a detached, distant, unaffected kind of feeling. It is a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for others in their suffering or misfortune, along with a strong desire to help.

William Bennett, in *The Book of Virtues*, says: “Just as courage takes its stand beside others in challenging situations, so compassion takes its stand with others in their distress.... It is an active disposition ... toward supportive companionship in distress or in woe” (p. 107). To feel another’s anguish, Bennett says, is the essence of compassion (p. 124).

But compassion is not just feeling sorry for someone or feeling bad about what someone else is going through. Compassion involves entering into the pain or suffering or troubles of another with a desire and commitment to help. It is about “being there” with or “being there” for another person.

If you really want to know the essence of compassion, all you need to do is look at Jesus. Not the Star Trek Vulcan Jesus or the Mister Rogers Jesus (though you can certainly see something of the caring, compassionate heart of Jesus in Mister Rogers). The real Jesus – the Jesus of the New Testament Gospels, the Jesus you meet in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – incarnated compassion. He was the living embodiment of compassion. As one Bible teacher (John MacArthur) put it, compassion colored everything Jesus did. Everything.

By incarnating compassion, Jesus showed us the compassionate heart of God. We see it time after time in the pages of the New Testament. We see it in Matthew 9, where we read that “Jesus went through all the towns and villages (of Galilee), teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When He saw the crowds, *He had compassion on them*, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (9:35-36, emphasis added). We see it here in Matthew 14, where Jesus *was moved with compassion for (the crowd)*, healed all the sick they brought to Him, and provided supper for five thousand plus all the women and children, taking what was not nearly enough – how do you feed a crowd of thousands with just five small barley loaves and a couple fish? – and by thanksgiving and multiplication making it not just enough but more than enough to feed this humongous crowd. We see it again in Matthew 15, where Jesus again is *moved with compassion* for the crowd of four thousand men, plus women and children, who had been with Him for three days, and their food supplies had run out. This miraculous feeding of the four thousand (Matthew 15:32-38) is another manifestation of the power and compassion of Jesus.

Then there are the two blind men, begging by the side of the road on the outskirts of Jericho, who heard that Jesus was coming, and started calling to Him at the top of their lungs. They didn't stop until they got His attention. Jesus asked them: "What do you want me to do for you?"

"Lord," they said, "we want our sight."

Jesus *was moved with compassion for them* and touched their eyes. When He did, two things happened immediately: 1) They received their sight; and 2) they followed Jesus (Matthew 20:29-34, emphasis added).

In Mark 1 (verses 40-42), there is a brief account of a man with leprosy who came running to Jesus, fell to his knees, and begged Jesus to heal him. He said to Jesus: "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

"*Filled with compassion*," verse 41 says, "Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man." He *touched* the leper. As we noted last Sunday, that is something nobody was supposed to do. You weren't even supposed to get close to a leper, or let a leper get close to you. But Jesus didn't let that stop Him. *Filled with compassion*, He said: "I am willing. Be clean!" (emphasis added).

"Immediately," verse 42 says, "the leprosy left him and he was cured." Another demonstration of the power and compassion of Jesus.

Jesus was also *moved with compassion* for a widow in the town of Nain, a woman whose only son had now died, leaving her all alone and with no means of support. When Jesus met the funeral procession and saw this grieving mother, His heart went out to her. *Moved with compassion for her*, He told her not to cry. Then He went over and touched the coffin. He said: "Young man, get up!" The dead man came back to life, sat up and began talking. He was reunited with his mother, fully alive (Luke 7:11-15, emphasis added).

Who can forget the story Jesus told about a man who had been beaten, robbed, stripped, and left half-dead in a ditch on the Jericho road? A priest and a Levite both pretended not to see him. But along came a "no-good" Samaritan, and what did he do? When he saw the man in need, Jesus said, *he was moved with compassion for him*, and went the extra mile and more to make sure he was cared for (Luke 10:30-35). The Samaritan incarnated compassion, and we continue to honor his example twenty centuries later.

Jesus could tell the Parable of the Good Samaritan with unquestioned authority because He lived it. He modeled the compassion, the kindness, the generosity and sacrifice about which He spoke. He didn't just talk the talk. He walked the walk. Every single day of His life. Jesus incarnated compassion.

## **TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE**

Someone once said that there are two kinds of people in the world. One kind is what you might call the "Here I Am" people. The other kind is the "There You Are" people. "Here I Am"

people are always trying to call attention to themselves. They are constantly saying: “Hey world, over here. Look at me. Pay attention to me. Admire me. Adore me. Value me.”

The other kind, the “There You Are” people, are the ones who say: “There you are. How are you, really? How is it going in your life? What can I do for you? How can I help you? How can I serve you? How can I minister to the needs in your life?”

It is obvious, isn’t it, that Jesus is a “There You Are” kind of person? As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, He was and is “a man for others.” Whether He is surrounded by a huge crowd, or He is one-on-one with a man, woman, or child in need, Jesus says in His heart: “There you are. I care about you more than you know.”

And, you know what? That is what Jesus says to you and me when He looks into our eyes: “There you are. I care about you so very much.”

### **COMPASSION INCARNATE**

The title of this message today is *Compassion Inc.* By that I do not mean “Compassion Incorporated,” as if compassion were some kind of marketing strategy, some kind of money-making scheme, just another business or an asset to be leveraged for either personal or political gain. I commend the ministry of Compassion International to you, because I believe they are committed, heart and soul, to incarnating the love and compassion of Jesus for impoverished children, families, and communities in many, many places around the world. But this message is not a commercial plug for Compassion International.

*Compassion Inc.* stands for “Compassion Incarnate,” which is what Jesus was and is. Jesus is what compassion looks like. Because He cared, because of His compassion, Jesus took time for people. He took time to teach and preach the good news of the kingdom. He took time to heal the sick, to drive out demons, to raise the dead, to comfort the afflicted, to love the least, the last, and the lost. He took time.

And now we are the body of Christ in the world. Each of us is part of His body. Now we are the hands and feet of Jesus. Now it is our job, our mission, to incarnate the love and compassion of Jesus in a world that is dying without it. It is our mission to take time to show love and compassion to others in Jesus’ name.

### **NEVER A TIME**

I have tried to remind you over the last two months or so that, as long as He may still be found, it is time to seek the Lord. There is never a time when it is not time to turn from our sins and to seek the Lord in trusting faith. But the day will come when the door is closed and it will be too late.

There is never a time when it is not time to love God above all else with everything you are and everything you have.

There is never a time when it is not time to love one another as Jesus has loved us. And there is never a time when it is not time to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

There is never a time when it is not time to let God love you with His redeeming, transforming love. You see, as Brennan Manning is fond of saying, God loves us just as we are, not as we should be, because none of us is as we should be. God loves each of us just as we are, and by His power and grace He makes us more and more like Him.

There is never a time when it is not time to get with the Spirit – the Holy Spirit. Never a time when it is not time to be filled with the Spirit and to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in your life.

There is never a time when it is not time to pray.

There is never a time when it is not time to believe – to believe and trust in Jesus Christ as the true Son of God, the promised Messiah and Savior of sinners, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the crucified and risen Savior, the Lord of life who rose up from the grave. Never a time when it is not time to trust Him with all your heart.

There is never a time when it is not time to give thanks to the Lord for every blessing, every moment, every breath. Never a time.

And, friends, there is never a time when it is not time for compassion. Never a time in this needy and hurting world when it is not time to incarnate compassion. Never a time when Jesus does not want us to incarnate His compassion and love for others. Never a time when Jesus does not want us to dress in the wardrobe He has picked out for us, a wardrobe that begins and ends with compassion and love. Never a time when it is not time to come alongside others in need and seek to make a difference in even one life.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.

