

JESUS AND THE AVERAGE JOE

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Their lives are spinning out of control. They can run but they cannot hide. The crowds find them. Jesus intrigues and excites these crowds. He casts out demons. He heals. He speaks with authority and insight when he teaches. News of him floods the towns and villages of Galilee. Folks from all over flock to him. It is not just Jesus, however. Jesus sent the Twelve throughout the towns of the area to teach and heal under his authority. They were superbly successful and became almost as much in demand as Jesus. They too have almost no time or privacy to eat because of their notoriety.

So, Jesus invites the Twelve, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest for a while.” They do, but folks track them down. They must kiss goodbye their R&R. They resent the intrusion and crush of people on their personal time and in their personal space. However, Jesus, equally weary, sees the great crowd and has *“compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”* He teaches and heals for hours. It grows late. The Twelve insist, *“Send them away, so they can go to a nearby village and buy food.”* The Twelve want that R&R Jesus promised them – kick back, relax, float on the lake, play cards and smoke cigars. Instead, the feeding of the five thousand follows, as Jesus feeds the crowd after starting with only five loaves and two fish.

Afterward, Jesus directs the Twelve to sail to Bethsaida on the other side of the lake, while he goes off to pray. He catches up with them later. They no sooner get across the lake than people recognize them and once again they are

overwhelmed with folks bringing their sick friends and relatives to Jesus. This is the case wherever Jesus goes. And as he goes the compassion he feels for people in need gives him the spiritual and physical strength to serve them.

Something deep within Jesus moved when he ran into ordinary people in need. *“He had compassion for them.”* As someone said, “Jesus has a thing for ordinary people.” (1) He teaches, heals, and feeds average Joes and Jills. His deep feelings for them lead him to set aside plans for a mini-vacation and instead give them what they need – health and wholeness.

This is an inspiring story but what does it say to ordinary everyday folks? To Average Joes and Jills? In a humorous aside, it brings to mind a study conducted by Kevin O’Keefe around 2003. O’Keefe set out to determine who would be considered an “Average Joe.” He discovered Joe has nine friends. Drinks the milk in the bowl after the cereal is finished. Eats 25 pounds of candy per year – generally not in one sitting. Recycles paper and plastic at least occasionally. Goes to bed before midnight. Believes in God and goes to church at least once per month. He’s 36 years old and can name the Three Stooges. I don’t eat that much candy and I’m much older than Joe, but, otherwise, I’m pretty average. (Moe, Larry, and Curly, later Schemp) How about you?

Here’s the significant part: We ordinary Joes and Jills believe in God and are in worship at least a dozen times per year. Ordinary people still turn to Jesus in the 21st century. We too have a level of need and desire for his ministry. And Jesus still has compassion for us.

What is this compassion of Jesus? It is a blend of sympathy and outrage. (2) In Mark's Greek, compassion literally means Jesus was "moved in his bowels." In the first century the bowels or one's intestines were believed to be the source of kindness and pity. One commentator wrote:

In the Hebrew understanding of our human makeup, compassion emanates from the depth of one's being; it is associated with guts or innards. Compassion is a gut reaction. So in response to a moving story, you might hear a Middle Easterner say, "You are cutting up my intestines." (3)

Jesus demonstrates that compassion is a blend of sympathy and outrage; sympathetic identification with a person's plight and outrage at external forces which have diminished a person's quality of life.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews in our N.T. says of Jesus, "*We do not have a high priest (Jesus) who is unable to sympathize with us in our weakness...Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find help in our time of need*" (4:14). The Greek word here for sympathize means literally "to feel or suffer with."

Jesus has sympathy for us because he shares our common human experience. He knows what suffering is for having done so in physical, emotional, and spiritual ways himself. He is on our emotional frequency. His heart beats next to ours. His stomach wrenches in tandem with ours.

This calls for a response from us to others, such as that of Karen's in an airport while waiting to pickup her

grandson at Christmas time. Her attention was caught by a boisterous woman at the ticket counter. She was melting down and berating the agent behind the counter, declaring that she was one of the top two woman swimmers in the world. She was clearly upset over the delay of her flight. She insisted the agent watch her bags, which the agent gently explained that she could not. Then the woman wheeled her bags to the rear of the seating area by two young boys who were eating McDonald's fries and burgers. She loudly declared how much she loved children and insisted on sharing their fries. By this time those nearby buried their faces in books and magazines, praying not to be seated by her during their flight.

Two security guards were called to assess the situation and determined she was not psychotic, just obnoxious.

However, Karen, watching all this unfold, heard an inner voice say, "She hasn't taken her meds today." She moved to one of the many abandoned seats near the disoriented woman and gently whispered, "Have you taken your meds today? I'm wondering because it seems though maybe you haven't." The woman's demeanor changed immediately. She became docile and said, "No, they're packed away in my suitcase." Karen asked if she was traveling to see someone. The woman said yes, her mom. Karen said, "You'll want to be in good shape when she picks you up then. Dig in your suitcase for your meds. I'll get you a bottle of water."

After taking her meds, the woman sighed and told Karen, "Thank you for taking care of me." Karen hugged her and said, "That's what we are here for, isn't it?"

Reflecting on this encounter later, Karen said, "You see, I have met this lady before. She has inhabited territory within me. We share *simpatico*, an understanding, a communal confusion – just hanging on. (4)

This Christian woman, Karen, displayed the same sympathy for a needy woman as does her Lord, Jesus Christ. Like him, she recognized another person's humanity in distress, and she responded with care and attention – with feeling for, or with compassion.

Jesus' compassion also showed itself by outrage, by his anger toward circumstances that diminish the quality of peoples' lives. Earlier in Mark's gospel he tells of Jesus healing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath while in the synagogue (3:16). The Pharisees set up the scenario to trap Jesus in violation of the Sabbath law. Mark says Jesus *"looked at the Pharisees with anger; he was grieved by their hardness of heart."* Jesus' anger here is two-fold. He's angry that the circumstances of disease or injury have diminished this man's life. And, he's angry with the Pharisees' lack of compassion for him. They would either have the man's healing delayed or denied rather than remedied as soon as possible.

Jesus' compassion was sympathetic and heartfelt but it was not wimpy. It had the component of righteous indignation against those evils that reduce peoples' lives to daily struggle. Every time he heals, it is his way of insisting, "This circumstance is not how living is supposed to be! In the kingdom of God, life will be redeemed."

This kind of Christlike compassion showed itself recently in the righteous indignation many felt upon seeing children taken from their parents' arms by ICE agents, separating families, at our nation's borders. American parents could feel the pain and fear of immigrant parents and children alike. The psychological and spiritual

damage being needlessly inflicted upon them was recognized. “Police our borders, but not that way!” was the cry. Thank God this insistence was heard and steps are slowly being taken to reunite families. Outrage provided the energy to force change. It was compassionate to do so.

The compassion of Jesus Christ for us invites us to intersect with the brokenness of each others’ lives.

Jesus both extends compassion to us and models our compassion for others. Theologian David Ford wisely wrote:

The shape of our lives can be distorted by multiple pressures that may seem small to outsiders, yet cumulatively can lead to desperation... We long for compassion...When someone has compassion on us we find ourselves really seen, heard, and attended to...In experiencing acts of compassion we are touching what is really important in world history. Before God, compassion is what matters most...Most acts of compassion are done by ordinary people (Average Joes and Jills) in unspectacular situations...Matthew 25 gives a list of the sorts of events that will prove to have been most significant: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, visiting prisoners, and caring for the sick...It is an invitation...to play our role in the ongoing drama of compassion. (5)

R&B singer and songwriter, John Legend, garnered eight Grammy nominations for his song “Ordinary People.” In the song’s chorus, he wrote:

We’re just ordinary people.
We don’t know which way to go.
Cuz we’re ordinary people.

Maybe we should take it slow. (6)
That's a sentiment many identify with. But the crowds in Galilee that day long ago, who were used to moving slowly, saw Jesus and moved quickly to him. He greeted them with compassion. **The same is true for folks today.**

Sources:

1. HOMILETICS ONLINE, 7/23/2006.
2. Ibid. The idea of Average Joe and Jill comes from this issue.
3. Greg Ogden, *The Essential Commandment*, IVP, p. 187-194.
4. Ibid
5. David F. Ford, *The Shape of Living*, Baker Academic, p. 164-166.
6. HOMILETICS, cited above.