

Matthew 14:13-21 (NRSV)

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

## Compassion's Plenitude

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: August 10, 2014 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Matthew 14:13-21

This morning we find Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He's been in his hometown of Nazareth, where the people dismissed him—who does this guy think he is, they said; wasn't he just the kid from down the street—and they took offense at him. If that wasn't bad enough, his popularity outside of his hometown had caught the attention of Herod, and not in a good way. Herod had had John the Baptist executed, and the king was full of guilt. When Herod heard about Jesus, he thought he might be John come back to haunt him. And if you spooked Herod, well, your head and your torso might quickly become disconnected from one another. So, Jesus is on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and the text tells us, "He withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself." No wonder.

But the Sea of Galilee is really a medium sized lake. The crowds simply walked around the edge of lake to the deserted place on the northeast shore where Jesus was heading. They actually got there faster than he did. When Jesus came ashore, there was the large crowd waiting for him. As tired and as stressed as he must have been, we are told that Jesus had compassion on the people, gave up his respite, and healed the sick.

It turned into a long day without rest. And as often as the disciples seem a bit dense in the Gospels, in all fairness, this was a long day for them, too. As dusk settled in the disciples came to Jesus and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves."

Well, you know the rest. In this deserted place there is no food, except five loaves and two fish. The disciples are exasperated. But Jesus took the loaves and fish, blessed them, and gave them to the disciples to hand out. More than five thousand people fed, and there were twelve baskets of leftovers.

Like so many of Jesus' miracles, we're left wondering how he did it. How did he feed over 5000 thousand people with a handful of food? Was it a supernatural event, or a magic trick? In the end, of course, we can't get a certain answer. But what we do get for certain is that all this happened because Jesus had compassion on the crowd. He stayed and healed them when he was weary and wanting to get away. And he fed them when there didn't seem to be enough to eat. Jesus had compassion and because of it, extraordinary, even impossible things took place.

I don't know about you, but I've been feeling a lot like the disciples these last few weeks. Hamas rockets and terrorists aim at Israeli citizens. Israeli forces inflict horrific casualties in return. ISIS, and like groups, butcher even women and children in the name of God. Russia rattles its sabers once again. Ebola is devastating portions of West Africa and threatens to spread. I don't know about you, but it leaves me wishing for a secluded place, away from it all, a place where I can send all the troubles home for dinner and be left alone. It's all so tiring, and there seems little possibility of a good end.

But like Jesus and his disciples, no one can easily dismiss or avoid the problems that call out and follow us around the lake and into the remotest corner of attempted our escape. For some, great horrors are close by. And just because they seem far away from others of us, we ignore them at our peril. And truth be told, even close by, in this very sanctuary this very morning, most of us have things on our plate that we would rather not have to deal with, problems we would like to leave behind, problems that we do not know how to solve.

The question, then, is not do we have to deal with them? Yes, we do. The question is, where do we find hope in the face of the intractable, the insurmountable?

Over the last few weeks I've spoken on the phone and corresponded with some people I've befriended in Israel in the last couple of years, who have encouraged hope where the possibilities seem so utterly bleak.

In 2003 Ben Kfir's 21-year-old daughter was murdered by a Palestinian terrorist. He talks of the searing heartbreak of her death, his beautiful young daughter with her entire future ahead of her. He describes how hatred burned in him, and he thought of murdering Palestinian laborers at a nearby construction site in revenge. But something deep inside of Kfir knew that violence and revenge would lead nowhere, or where they would lead was worse than nowhere. The agonizing process of bereavement finally led him to The Parents Circle Families Forum, an organization comprising Israelis and Palestinians who have lost an immediate family member to the conflicts. Two years ago I met Kfir and a Palestinian mother whose son was also shot and killed by an Israeli in Jerusalem. It was clear that both of these parents still suffered their grief. It was clear that anger and hurt remained. And yet they committed themselves to talking and sharing their agony and developing an increasing appreciation and compassion for each other. Many Israelis and Palestinians think they are crazy, but they know that the insanity lies in the other direction.

Kfir says, "The encounter with this group gave meaning to my life, and our joint work is what gives me strength to get out of bed in the morning. We have one goal — to prevent additional bereavement on both sides."<sup>1</sup>

Kfir is clear that neither the Israeli nor Palestinian leadership at this has the courage or wherewithal necessary to move things forward. In a recent speech he said, "Our prime minister never misses an opportunity to stand in front of every microphone and say that the terror infrastructure must be destroyed, and I certainly agree with him. But I believe that Hamas is not the infrastructure of terrorism. The infrastructure is poverty, ignorance, hopelessness, despair and the basic absence of security. These are not things the IDF [Israel Defense Forces] can handle." To be clear, Kfir sees as much blame among the Palestinian leadership, and he believes that terror cannot be tolerated. He agrees that terrorists must be stopped by force for now. But he also believes that there is a deeper infrastructure of terrorism—poverty, hopelessness and fear—which must be addressed, and when it is, there will be no disillusionment for the terrorists to feed on.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes from Ben Kfir from: Read more: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/ben-kfir-bereaved-father-israel-hamas-gaza-war-rocket.html##ixzz39uQVp9ld>

Asked if he is hopeless about the future, Kfir says, “No. Any student of history knows that France and Germany slaughtered each other from the end of the 13th century until the end of World War II, and today they are the two cornerstones of the European Union. We have all read about Ireland, South Africa — conflicts that lasted hundreds of years, at the end of which a leadership arose that managed to resolve them.”

But in the meantime, until leaders arise who will make the difficult choices, where is hope to be found.

I met Rachel Korazim, also in 2012. She is a world renowned Israeli educator who briefed us for our visit to the Jerusalem Holocaust museum, Yad Vashem. Korazim is about my ages and has lived in Israel all her life. She makes her home in the ancient port city of Jaffa, on the south side of Tel Aviv. I spoke on a conference call with her a few days ago about what things were like there with all the shelling. She said that people were understandably on edge, but she wanted us to hear a more positive side, too. Korazim is a natural story teller, so she started most of her answers with, “Let me tell you a story.”

Jaffa is a diverse city with many Jews and Arabs. There is an Arab restaurant that is one of her favorite places to eat. As you may imagine, when the hostilities broke out with Gaza, about as far away from here as Gillette Stadium in Foxboro, there was concern about rising tensions in Jaffa. For Korazim, there was also concern that the Arab restaurant would be shunned by Israelis. But most customers made a point of patronizing the restaurant as a show of support. And the restaurant owner and staff wore T-shirts that said, “Arabs and Jews Refuse to Be Enemies.”

Korazim’s adult daughter lives in one of the areas of Israel that has several towns that are of largely Arab population. When the hostilities broke out, she was in need of a prescription for heart medication. The only pharmacies anywhere nearby were in Arab towns. Korazim’s daughter called the pharmacist, whom she knew well, and asked, “Is it safe for me to come and get my prescription?”

He told her, “No, I don’t think so. There is a lot of agitation in the streets, and I fear you might be a target.” He also said, “I don’t think I can come your way, either. The Israeli Defense Forces are on heavy patrol, and I’m worried I would be detained or maybe worse. So,” he went on, “this is what we’ll do. I will send my wife to the checkpoint. They won’t bother her. She can meet you there and give you the medication.”

I found the stories very inspiring. But, in truth, I was left wondering whether these small efforts, as wonderful as they were, could have any impact at the larger scale. Rockets and bombs were falling. Deep divisions were in evidence throughout the region. Hatred and blame were much easier to find than talk of peace, coexistence and cooperation.

I asked Korazim, “When the fighting stops in Gaza, what happens next? How is it possible to find hope? Do you think there can be successful negotiations?”

This time Korazim didn’t have a story, or not exactly a story. But she did have an outline of what it might look like. She said, “I don’t think there is great hope that the politicians will solve the problems.” Here she echoed Kfir’s estimation of the Israeli and Palestinian leaders. But she went further. “Those leaders,” she said, “have too many constituencies and politicians to answer to right now. What has to happen is that we, and I mean the people not the politicians, we have to help Gaza. We have to figure out a way

for these people—not our enemies but our neighbors—to raise crops and go to the beaches and have water and have trade. We have to make it clear that we care for them, that they aren't some dehumanized entity. We have to make it clear that the tragic loss of life that they have experienced gives us great sorrow. We have to have compassion."

Again, this sounds very like Kfir. "The infrastructure [of terrorism] is poverty, ignorance, hopelessness, despair and the basic absence of security." Surely they are both right. But the skeptic in me wonders. Can a few people with a few resources and good hearts make a difference in the face of such massive brokenness and need?

Then I listened to myself. "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish," I heard myself say.

And then I saw before me the vision of one taking these meager gifts, lifting them toward heaven, giving thanks for them, and then giving them to the hungry crowd. I saw that the crowd ate its fill. And I saw that there were twelve baskets of leftovers. I saw all this because one man had compassion on them. And I could nearly hear his voice saying, "Go, and do likewise." Amen.