

July 19, 2015

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Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Splagchnizomai

“One death is a tragedy, one million is a statistic.” You may have heard that saying, “One death is a tragedy, one million a statistic.” Even if you have not heard it, you may be familiar with a characteristic of human nature that it expresses: We hear a single, sad story—a little girl who has a terrible disease—we hear about that and our guts wrench, we feel a great sadness and a great desire for something different, something to do about it. It’s the feeling of compassion, a humanitarian feeling, compassion.

But then, there’s this: though we feel the tragedy of a single, awful loss, when we hear about a multitude of devastation, it doesn’t even register. Last week the number of refugees in Syria surpassed the 4 million mark. Four million Syrian refugees. Do we feel four times worse than when it was only 1 million refugees? Only 1 million refugees?

It’s a paradox—compassion and its complexities—it’s a paradox, and a characteristic of human nature, and the subject of much study these days. Type in compassion—or its sister emotion and sometime synonym, empathy—type in the words compassion research or empathy studies into an internet search and you will find a host of articles and books on it. Much of it disheartening. There’s a lot of writing and reflecting on compassion and empathy in the worlds of social science and psychoanalysis and even memoir, but a lot of it explores and reiterates that saying about one death, and one million. Various studies find that though we may think if more people are affected, we would—should—care more, the opposite is true. We care less. This lack of caring is not just about the numbers affected, though, it’s also about the location, and the likeness. That is, compassion or empathy also seem to be provincial and personal. We care more about people who are very close to us, and like us, than people on the other side of the globe, people of different nationalities, or races, or religions.

In the face of these findings, some are calling into question empathy itself. How valuable of an emotion is it, anyway? How reliable, how significant a factor for the common good can empathy be, when that’s how it’s experienced and expressed? The harshest critics contend that because of these very characteristics, empathy is actually a source of moral failure. You can’t count on what you’re feeling. If any kind of progress is going to be achieved, the fickle emotion of empathy must be abandoned for the cold hard facts of reason.

I’m fascinated by these articles about personal motivation and the public good. I recognize all too well that I’m prey to empathetic provincialism and to disregarding the suffering that we know occurs on a global scale. I’m swayed, too, by the assertion that reason needs to be a factor in making compassionate choices for the greater good.

But I don’t think that means we discount empathy, or that we need less compassion.

There’s the gospel, after all: the gospel, the good news that God felt such empathy for humanity that God became a human being. God came among us as Jesus, one person, who suffered a tragic death. God did that, for all, because no one is a statistic. God did that, because God felt there’s something different to be done, God wanted for us that something different yet to come. That’s the gospel, the good news of God’s boundless compassion for the world, for the whole world, for all its multitudes, and for the fall of a sparrow. That’s the gospel, the good news that God’s love is limitless, that God loves all, and also you. That’s the gospel in general.

And then there’s the gospel, specifically, today’s gospel reading, from Mark chapter six. We’ve been progressing through this gospel these past several weeks. After this week, we’ll

leave it for a while and spend a good long stretch in the gospel of John. But today we finish up our tour through the first part of Mark. After last week's gory flashback, the reading today picks up with the return of the disciples from their first missionary journey. Back at the beginning of this chapter, the disciples had been sent out to carry on and continue Jesus' mission. It was a key point in the gospel, a key point, where Jesus invites his followers to do what he's doing. As Jesus sends them out he tells them not to pack. Instead of bringing their own stuff, Jesus said, instead of bringing their assumptions and comforts, they should look to their hosts. That is, to be followers of Jesus, to engage in mission, is to seek, rely upon, be blessed by the gifts of those with whom we interact.

All of that happened back at the beginning of Mark chapter six. Now the disciples come back from that first mission trip. And has been a wild success! It worked! Looking to others is a great way to do mission! Now they come back to tell Jesus about what they've done. But they're been so busy, they haven't even had a chance to eat. Perhaps you know what that's like, when you get so busy, you skip meals. According to the gospel, that's not good. Jesus tells the disciples to come away and rest. What good news that is! What a good gospel for the summer, one that asserts that you have to take breaks. From the very lips of Jesus, "Come away and rest." They do. The disciples and Jesus are resting, and then crowds seek them out, people from all over the place, countless numbers.

It is here, specifically, that the gospel so differs from the critiques of empathy. It is here that the gospel differs from the shortcomings of human empathy. Jesus sees a large crowd, numberless people lacking direction, sheep without a shepherd, people seeking relief. Jesus sees a multitude of refugees, and they are not a statistic—not to the one who numbers the hairs on our heads. Jesus sees the crowd and he feels an emotion. In Greek, the original language of the New Testament, the word for what Jesus feels is *splagchnizomai*. How well that strange word evokes what it is, *splagchnizomai* literally means gut-wrenching, a deep, internal pain, a desire for something different, to do something different. In English, compassion. And so Jesus begins to teach them. And heal them. And later he will feed them.

We call compassion a humanitarian emotion. In the sense that it can move us to care for, help other people, it is. But the gospel shows that compassion is not so much a human quality, as a divine one. God became a human being, so that we could better learn what compassion is. God came to earth, because we are provincial. God became like us, because we cleave towards those who are like us. God knows that, and uses that. God uses what we are, to move us beyond what we are. In Jesus, God teaches us how to do that.

For, compassion can be taught. Amidst disheartening assertions and findings on empathy, there's also a competing body of recent research that shows that empathy is a choice, and a skill, that compassion is a capacity. It's something we have, something we are given, a quality of being human, which can be practiced, and extended, and improved, increased.

That's gospel, too, that's the good work of God in us. There may be times we can't trust our feelings, but we can trust God's feelings. God loves the whole world, every last person on it, and God's compassion can heal us, and teach us divine *splagchnizomai* as well.