

The Power of Compassionate Community
Mark 6:30–44
Sunday, March 8, 2026 (Lent 3)
Lenten Series: Tell Me Something Good

Let us pray: Lord, may your Word feed and nourish our spirits, so that we might feed and nourish others, in Christ's name. Amen.

Does anyone remember what happened six years ago today? We had our last in-person worship service before Covid lockdown. It was the Second Sunday in Lent. The Adult Bell Choir played, and the choir sang. The ushers for that day were Lee Holt, Peter Crawford, and Gordon & Mimi Wright. Pam Schafer gave the flowers in memory of her mother. Susanne Engheta read the story of God calling Abram, and I read the story of Jesus telling Nicodemus that he needed to be born again. I preached on how we need to trust God and take a step into a new life, not having any idea the new life that we were all about to step into. On the cover of the bulletin were the words from the song, "Into the Unknown" from the movie *Frozen 2*, "Where are you going? Don't leave me alone. How do I follow you...into the unknown?" The last hymn we sang together was, "This Is a Day of New Beginnings," and it certainly was.

We didn't gather together in person again for *six months*. Can you imagine that now, going *six months* without being together? Some of you weren't even here yet. And some who *were* here that day *aren't* anymore. I remember that at one point during the service, Ruth Lieberman swallowed funny and had a coughing fit, to the point that she had to get up and leave. Now, she was *fine*; she lived for three more years. But the looks on the faces of everyone around her? People were *terrified* that *she* had Covid and that *they* were going to get Covid and we were all going to die.

But as scary as it was, I have to admit, there were some things about those first few weeks that were pretty nice. Life slowed down. I got to sleep in on Sunday mornings and worship with other churches virtually.

I remember that once we had a sense that we were going on lockdown, I went to Target to pick up some things, and I found a pack of coconut and caramel Oreos. I thought, “These will last me through lockdown.” They did *not*, and they’ve never made them again, which is very disappointing, because they were *really* good. But for a few weeks, I got to sit at home and eat my Oreos.

We settled into new rhythms of virtual school and virtual worship and virtual work. But at one point I realized that the church was empty, so I could be just as isolated *here* as I was at home, and with three young kids at home, I wasn’t getting done what I needed to working from home. So I started coming here to work every day. And, again, at first it was pretty nice. A change of scenery. There was no one else in the building, so I could get so much done. But after a while, the loneliness set in. It was *too* quiet here; *too* isolated. I remember how excited I was when the pest control guy came to spray the building. I wouldn’t leave him alone. It was like, “Human interaction! Talk to me!”

And I remember how excited I was when we finally got to worship together again, outdoors, on September 27. Even though we weren’t singing hymns or hugging or even shaking hands or doing a lot of other things we would normally do (because we still weren’t sure about all *that*), just *seeing* you again and being *together* again felt so good. And so *now*, if there’s snow on a Sunday and we aren’t sure whether to cancel worship or not, we wait as long as we can and make *every effort* to gather in person. Even when people have said to me, “These other churches have already cancelled. Shouldn’t *we*?” I’m always like, “Let’s just wait a little longer and see.” If there is *any chance* that we can be *together*, we try to make that happen.

Because one of the things that Covid reminded us of is that human beings are not meant to be *alone*. We *need* each other. We need to be in *community*. Because you can’t be a Christian by yourself. You can *believe* in Jesus on your own, but you can’t really *follow him* and *live out* your faith. Being in community

with others is what makes it possible for us to live out our faith. And that's one of the things that we see in this story of Jesus feeding the 5,000.

Throughout the season of Lent, we are going through a sermon series where we look for the *good news* in Lent. So often this is a somber season of self-denial that almost feels like *bad news*. But as we've been saying, this season is building up to the greatest *good news* of all – that Jesus Christ died for the forgiveness of our sin and rose from the dead so that we could live new lives with God and with each other now and forever! And as we look at the world around us, so much can feel like *bad news*. The world needs *good news*. So where is the good news in Lent?

When we think about this story of Jesus feeding the 5,000, we tend to think of it as a story of good news. Jesus performs a miracle and feeds 5,000 people. That's great! But this actually starts off with a lot of *bad news*. Right before this story, we hear about the murder of John the Baptist by King Herod. This was Jesus' relative, who *baptized* Jesus and *prepared the way* for Jesus, and Jesus is *devastated* by the bad news of his death. Jesus calls his disciples to come away with him to a deserted place and rest a while, because so many people had been coming to them that they didn't even have time to eat. They are overworked and exhausted. Bad news. But when they *try* to go away by themselves to rest, the crowds follow them, and when Jesus and his disciples cross over to the other side of the lake, the crowds are there waiting for them. Bad news.

But, it says, Jesus *sees* the crowd and has *compassion* for them, because they are like sheep without a shepherd. So he starts teaching them. He teaches throughout the day until it's late. The disciples come to Jesus and say, "We're out here in the middle of nowhere, and it's late, and everyone is hungry, and we *still* haven't eaten." Bad news. They tell Jesus to let the crowd go find something to eat. To which Jesus says, "*You* give them something to eat." Bad news. They're in the middle of nowhere. They don't *have*

any food. There's over 5,000 people, so even if there was food to buy, they wouldn't be able to afford food for that many people. Jesus says, "Well, how much food *is* there? Go see." So the disciples go check around and find out that there are five loaves of bread and two fish. Again, bad news. That's not enough.

But then in the midst of all that bad news, Jesus brings about *good* news. He takes the five loaves and the two fish, and he blesses them and gives them to the disciples to give to the people. And they just keep giving and giving and giving and giving. And before they know it, everyone has *eaten*, and they're *full*, and there's still twelve baskets full of leftovers. *That is good news!*

But what makes this good news possible? We might say, "The power of Jesus!" But Jesus has *always* had that power. He isn't just sitting around, multiplying bread and fish by himself all the time. In fact, one of the temptations he faced from Satan in the wilderness was when Satan said, "You've got to be starving. Take these rocks and turn them into bread so that you can eat." Jesus *could* have done that, but he doesn't. He says, "It is written in scripture, one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." So there are times when Jesus *has* the power to do this, but he *refuses*. What makes *this* time different? What makes *this* good news possible?

What makes it possible is that Jesus sees the needs of the people. The people are *together*, he *sees* their needs, and he has *compassion*. This story shows us the power of community and compassion.

We live in a highly individualistic society. A society in which we are taught to be independent. To not burden anyone else. To fend for yourself and look out for yourself. A society in which *my individual rights* take priority over the rights of *others*. A society that prizes "self-made" people who pick themselves up by their bootstraps. And like we talked about a couple of weeks ago, we are more

connected through technology than at any other time in human history, and yet there are higher rates of loneliness and depression than ever before. For all the good things that technology has brought into our lives, all the ways that it has connected us with the world around us and with other people, it has also served to *isolate* us.

Because with the rise of smart phones and Artificial Intelligence, I don't actually *need* you anymore. If I have a question, I can Google it or ask ChatGPT. If my sink breaks, I don't need to ask *you* for help, if you know how to fix it or if you know a good plumber. I can simply look on my phone and watch a YouTube video on how to fix it or find a highly rated plumber without ever interacting with another person. I don't need to know what you think about a particular political issue, when I can go online and encounter any number of diverse viewpoints without ever actually engaging in dialogue with another person. And don't get me wrong, I'm not anti-technology. But technology is supposed to *enhance* our relationships, not *replace* them. But relationships can be so messy and complicated that sometimes it's just easier to look at our screens.

So our society *emphasizes* individualism, and technology makes it *easier*, and that mindset has filtered its way into the church. For so many Christians, the focus is on the individual. *My* personal preferences. *My* spiritual growth. *My* well-being. *My* salvation. *My* personal relationship with Jesus Christ. How many of the hymns that we sing are written in the first person – *I, me, my, mine* – like we're just a bunch of individuals who happen to be singing together and not one body in Christ? So it's not just that the antidote to loneliness in our society is the church, because not every church *is*.

We live in a culture of indifferent individualism. As long as *I* have what I need to be healthy and whole and happy, then I am fairly indifferent to the needs of others. But what Christ models for us and what Christ calls us to is not indifferent individualism. It is compassionate community. The miracle in this

story happened because the people were *together* and Jesus had *compassion*. *That* is when the power of God was at work. If the people *weren't* together, there wouldn't have been any *need* for this miracle. And if Jesus hadn't had compassion, he wouldn't have *bothered* doing the miracle. And so many of Jesus' miracles are the same way. Very rarely does Jesus heal one person who is totally on their own. More often than not, it is someone who is surrounded by *other* people. A *group* of lepers. A paralyzed man whose friends carry him to Jesus. A blind man whose friends bring him to Jesus. A father who is grieving his dead daughter, a mother who is grieving her dead son, sisters who are grieving their dead brother, and they are surrounded by all these other people who are mourning with them. Almost all of Jesus' miracles take place *in community*, when Jesus *sees the needs of the people* and has *compassion*.

And when *we* live life together, seeing *each other's* needs and the needs of those around us, and we have *compassion* for those people – not *indifference*, not *blame* or *ridicule* – then the power of God can do amazing things among *us*, too. When we *pray* for one another and *feed* one another and *comfort* one another and *laugh* with one another and *cry* with one another and *serve* with one another and *advocate* for one another, the power of God is at work. But we can only *do* that if we are in *community* with one another and if we *care* about one another. If we see people suffering, and we suffer *with* them; that's what compassion is. I see what you are going through, and I am moved by love for you, and so I want to be *with* you in it.

Human beings were not meant to be *alone*. And the *good news* that we have to share with the world is that you don't *have* to be. Jesus calls us out of indifferent individualism into compassionate community. To open our hearts and our minds and our arms to others and draw them in to the loving embrace of God. But we have to look beyond ourselves. As individuals *and* as a church, we have to look beyond ourselves to see the needs of others and *care* for them. The world *needs* compassionate community; it is *starving* for it. And when we *embody* that – when we live life together and see the needs of others and are moved

by compassion to meet them – God can take the little that we have to offer and do miraculous things with it, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.