Compassion and Calling

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0:00] You'll find it helpful if you turn back to Matthew 14. We're looking at verses 13 to 36 that Patty just read for us. And as you turn back there, I see it on page 820.

The news of the violent murder of 50 people in Christchurch on Friday has brought tears and outrage and promises that things must change.
And there's a strong sense, I think, in the headlines as world leaders have spoken, and I've read some columns on this, that things are not as they ought to be.
And as we come to Matthew 14, we get to see just a little bit of Jesus' compassion and his power in feeding the 5,000 and walking on water.
And it pictures how the world ought to be and something of what Jesus is going to do about it and how he involves us in bringing that about.
[1:02] So we're halfway through Matthew's Gospel, 28 chapters. This is chapter 14, and it's a turning point. And the signal for the turning point is the violent murder of John the Baptist in the first paragraph of chapter 14 you looked at last week.

That's what sets off the action. So you see in verse 13, just look down at verse 13 at the beginning of our section. Now when Jesus heard this, that is John the Baptist beheading, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself.
John the Baptist and Jesus are linked. John the Baptist had a remarkable ministry, such a big ministry opening the door for Jesus.
And back in chapter 4, when John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus withdrew. And now that he has been violently murdered and his head's been cut off by Herod at a banquet, Jesus again withdraws to be alone by himself because he sees in John the Baptist's death his own coming death.
He's not just tired. This is not ordinary fatigue. It's not just he needs a break. He needs to get away, not just to process it, but to pray to his heavenly father because he knows that ultimately it is through his death that God will bring about the new creation.
[2:26] But you'll see he doesn't get an opportunity to actually pray until 10 verses later in verse 23 because there are so many needs, so many people pressing him around with sick people following him around the lake.

And Matthew doesn't want us to miss this. So he gives us a kind of a compassion sandwich. Let me explain what I mean. Sandwich.
Sandwich has two pieces of bread either side. In the middle are these two massive miracles of staggering power. The feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus walking on the water.
And on the outside of the, it's not thick bread, the two crispy thins, if you like. That's what we eat sometimes in our house. And they are about compassion.
So look at the crispy, crispy things. Verses 13 to 14, you can see there that Jesus gets out of the boat. He's confronted with all this suffering and his heart goes out in compassion and he just heals the sick.
[3:26] That's all it says. And then in verse 34 to 36, the night, the morning after, after he's walked across the lake, the same thing happens. People bring to him all their sick and now Jesus allows them to be healed just by touching the fringe of his garment.

He doesn't even stop to wean them from their superstitious view of him. He just uses his power and compassion for healing. And this is what frames the two big miracles.
And it's a reminder of the depth of Jesus' compassion to those in need. That he's come for the sick as a saviour. That God in the flesh is bringing a kingdom that's going to drive back all that is against us.

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And I want to make two points from the main section of this. So there's the frame of compassion. And the first point is this. The wonder of Jesus at work.
These are two miracles of astonishing power. And the first in verses 22 to 27. Sorry. Where am I? [4:29] Correct me someone. Verse 15 to 21. That was a test. Everyone with me? Is everyone awake? Does everyone want to be?

Okay. The first miracle, the feeding of the 5,000. This is the only miracle that Jesus does before his death and resurrection that comes in all four Gospels. It's really important.
And it's really important because it's not about bread. As Jesus says two chapters later. Bread is the basic food.
And it's a sign that God alone can satisfy the needs of our hearts. He knows the hairs of our head. He knows the deepest desires of our hearts. And he alone can meet and match those needs lavishly and overflowingly.
And in the Old Testament, it was a sign of God's care for his people when he rescued them from slavery in Egypt and brought them out through the wilderness to a land that he was going to give them. And every day they woke up.
[5:31] And there on the ground was bread, manna, supplied from heaven for them to eat directly from the hand of God. And God said, I did this to test you. To show you that I am a God of life and fulfillment.

And here we are in the wilderness again. The word for desolate place, verse 13, is the word wilderness. And as evening comes, you can almost hear the tummies of the crowd rumbling. They've been there all day without food. And the disciples helpfully point out there is no food. So Jesus takes command.
And you can see in verse 19, he orders the crowd. It's a very strong word. He orders the crowd to sit down in groups. It's a dining directive. There's a specific seating arrangement he has.
Then he prays, breaks the bread, and gives it out. Verse 20, and they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up 12 baskets full of broken pieces left over.
[6:29] And those who ate were about 5,000 men besides women and children. So about 5,000 family units, about 20,000 people fed with just a couple of pieces of fish and bread.

And I don't need to point out to you that this defies the laws of thermodynamics. As humans, matter can neither be created nor destroyed. Think about this. At the end of this day, there was more matter in the universe than there was at the beginning of the day.
It's a miracle of creative power. And it's not just wonder bread. I mean, everybody ate and was satisfied. And there's more at the end than when he started.
Exactly the right number of baskets to feed the disciples to show that Jesus is the God of plenty and of provision. And then in verse 22, Jesus takes command again.
And he orders the disciples, go across the lake before me in the boat. And he dismisses the crowd. Another very strong word. Verse 23. And after he dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray.
[7:38] And when evening finally came, he was there alone. This is the only place in Matthew other than the temptation narrative where Jesus is completely alone. John the Baptist's death has been a watershed moment for him and he must turn to his father and pray.

And my calculation is that he prays for about 10 to 11 hours. This miracle takes place at Passover, John's Gospel tells us. Sunset is between 5.30 and 6 o'clock.
He comes walking on the water in the fourth watch of the night. There's enough light at dawn to be able to see him in verse 25. So he is laboring before his father in prayer for 10 to 11 hours alone.
And he's praying there because he loves his father. He's praying because he is facing his own death and he's seeking his father's strength. And he's praying because he knows his disciples are so weak. And he has to transfer his ministry to them.
And while he's praying there on the mountain, a storm comes up on the sea again. And the disciples are in trouble again. And as they're struggling against the winds and the waves, Jesus comes walking to them.
[8:46] Just look how Matthew expresses this. He was in the boat, by the way. Verse 25. In the fourth watch of the night, he came to them walking on the sea. That's it.

No explanation. No reason given. No reason. Jesus does what no human can do. See, we humans, we swim in the water. We swim through the water.

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We sometimes sink under the water. Jesus walks on the water. It's the only miracle I can think of apart from the transfiguration which has to do with Jesus' own body.
And the disciples are so focused on rowing and the wind and the water that when Jesus comes, they shriek in the Greek that it's a ghost.
I don't know where they got that from. Verse 27. Immediately, Jesus speaks to them and says, Take heart. It is I, which is the big name for God in the Old Testament. It is I. Do not be afraid.
[9:42] So we know in the Old Testament, the waters are the powers of chaos and disintegration. And God himself has control over them. God himself alone can walk over these.

And here with the echoes of God in the Old Testament, Jesus says, Be brave. I am. Do not fear. And he climbs into the boat and the wind stops and they worship him and they say, Truly, you are the Son of God.
There is nothing in this creation beyond your control and they wonder and they worship. Now, before I move to the second point, the focus is not on the staggeringness of the miracles.
The miracles are hardly even related. The focus is on Jesus himself. This is very important for us because many of us read the Bible looking for passages that are about me.
And we come to these great long sections that are about God and his glory. We need to run through them until we can find something about me. But the Bible is not about you. The Bible is about Jesus Christ.
[10:46] And it's as we see Jesus Christ and we come to worship and to wonder, Jesus then begins to include us in what he's doing. And that's the second point. So I move firstly from the wonder of Jesus' work.

Secondly, the wonder of Jesus' work through his disciples. You cannot miss this. If you look back at verse 15, in the feeding of the 5,000, it's the disciples who take the initiative to get rid of the crowd. Now, they sound caring, but they just want the crowd gone. They say to Jesus, send the crowds away, Jesus, to buy food for themselves. It is a command. It's polite in English.
Send them away. Get rid of these crowds. Not many places do they give commands to Jesus. But Jesus has his own command for them, verse 16.
He says, they need not go away. You give them something to eat. It is not a suggestion. You have to act. And it is absolutely impossible for them.
[11:54] And they point out, we've got five little pita breads and a couple of sardines. What can we possibly do? What is Jesus doing? Jesus is doing here what he does with every single one of us, every single disciple.

He's allowed the crowds to get hungry. And now he calls on his disciples to do what is completely beyond them, completely impossible. Not just so that they will see their own inability and inadequacy, but so that he can then include them in what he's doing, so that he can work through them and through us.
He can't use disciples who think they're all sufficient. He wants his disciples to care like he cares for these hungry people, because disciples are meant to reflect their master.
But he wants to show his own power and his compassion through them to the crowd. So they say, we do not have.
I have a friend who told me this week that he worked for a church for a while, and every time they had an idea in his ministry, they went to the top brass, and the top brass said no, because there was no money. He said it's called scarcity thinking.
[13:07] And I think as Christians, it's easy to get into this mode with Jesus. Lord, we just don't have it in us. What you're asking me is way above me. I'll just do this.

And it's exactly here that Jesus works so wonderfully. It's when they're at their wit's end. They give to Jesus their pitiful Peters, and Jesus takes it and makes manna from heaven and feeds and satisfies, I don't know, 20,000 people.
But notice the way Jesus does it. He doesn't do the Hogwarts thing. He doesn't just float down casseroles from heaven. He uses the disciples.
And just look at verse 19. If you look down at verse 19, here's the question. Does the multiplication of the bread happen in Jesus' hands or the disciples' hands? Well, I don't know.
We're not told. But here's the thing. He breaks the bread, gives it to his disciples, and he doesn't give it to the crowd. The disciples give it to the crowd. They are now involved in the feeding. It's a complete wonder.

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[14:18] You take your scarcity and you give it to Christ, and he takes it and he breaks it and he gives it back to you, and he says, now give that away to other people. So if you want to be a channel for God's blessing to others, if you want God to feed others through you with the bread of heaven, it's not enough just to believe in his power or his compassion.

You have to see how he wants to involve you in giving plenty to others, to take our scarcity and to transform it into abundance for others.
And I reckon by the time they've been giving out food to 3,000 people or 6,000 people, the disciples are now caring for these people in the most practical way possible. This is all of us.
We just do not have the power in ourselves to love each other as we should. We can't work up the care that we need to be a body of Christ here.
But when we bring to Jesus our inability and our lack, he takes our lack of love and he gives it back to us, and we give it to others as well.
[15:21] Just when we say to him, I don't know how to love that person, the temptation is to do the easy thing and just have the polite avoidance, the polite Canadian avoidance of that other person.

That's not Jesus' way. I mean, if you feel your love is feeble, bring your love to him and he'll set it aflame and draw other people to it. I mean, if you feel your faith is failing, bring it to him and he will increase it.
If you feel sufficient and inadequate, he says, yes, now I can work through you. And Matthew so wants us to get this, that he includes a little story in this gospel that's not in any of the other gospels, and that is Peter himself gets out and walks on the water.
So the crowd disappears in the second half of the story. It's only the disciples in the boat. And after Jesus has come to them and revealed himself, in verse 28 we read, Peter says, Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.
Now, I've asked people this week, do they think this is a good idea or not of Peter's? And the result of my little survey is people are pretty evenly divided.
[16:34] The most Anglican answer came from Jeremy, who said it would be a lot safer if Jesus got in the boat. What's lovely about this is that Jesus doesn't criticise Peter.

He encourages him. Peter says, if it's you, tell me to get out of the water and come to you. And Jesus says, come. And he does.
And Peter too begins to walk on the water toward Jesus. Now, those of you who've been with us for a while know that Matthew is the master of unnecessary detail.
We've seen this over and over. And every time we see an unnecessary detail, our senses go off.
The thing about Peter's walking on the water is it's so unnecessary. Peter didn't need to ask this. Jesus didn't need to allow him to join it. But he does. And that's the point. You can't have a clearer picture, I think, of Jesus sharing his power, including Peter in what he's doing, even walking on the water.
[17:36] There are no hungry people to be fed here. It's just the raging sea and the deep water. And Peter's desire to do something that Jesus is doing. And there's all sorts of things that Jesus does, of course, that we can never do.

And the problem is we often pray for those things. You know, we want luxury and comfort and glory and excuse from, to be excused from suffering or a big flashy way out. And God's answer is usually no.
But the book of James later tells us, you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your pleasures, your hedonism, literally.
But here Peter asks and Jesus allows him. It's almost as if Peter has listened to Jesus say, ask anything in my name and I'll give it to you.
Ask and you'll receive that your joy may be full. And is it possible that we receive so little because we ask so little?
[18:38] Do you think that's possible? Do you think it might be that we know that Jesus loves hearing the little things, but we're reluctant to give him the big things?

I mean, do you ask him to do big things in your life and through you to others? I think this passage is encouraging us to do that. Because his power and his compassion don't, are not just toward the outsider.
It doesn't stop when you become a disciple. He wants to work through us. And the story gets even better. As Peter is walking across the sea to Jesus, Peter takes his eyes off Jesus and begins to

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sink.
He doesn't suddenly go, but he begins to sink. We don't know how far he sinks. And then he calls out, Lord, save me. And Jesus reaches out his hand, takes hold of Peter and brings him to himself and then puts him in the boat.
It's a lovely touch because Jesus could easily have just spoken the word and Peter would have gone back in the boat, but he doesn't. He reaches out his hand and takes him physically.
[19:51] Then in verse 31, Jesus says, are you of little faith? Why did you doubt? He was allowed to walk on the water and Jesus allowed him to sink a bit.

So he had some faith, but it was a little faith. And the word doubt here is a, it's a unique word. It's not unbelief. It's not, you know, massive intellectual reservations.
It's just the simple word for hesitation. It's used later in the gospel, in the last chapter of the gospel, when the disciples meet the risen Jesus on Galilee. Exactly the same word. It says, they worshiped him.
They worshiped him and some doubted, some hesitated. And just as they're here, what Jesus does, he reaches across hesitation and takes hold of us and brings us to himself.
Peter could never have walked on the water on his own. But it's when he begins to think about his circumstances and think about all the things that are against him, more than Jesus, he begins to sink.
[20:52] And even then, Jesus reaches across him, reaches across his hesitation, holds him and grows him and teaches him. This is lovely stuff, because even when our faith wobbles, Jesus still empowers us.

You don't have to be a perfectionist as a disciple. It's Christ's power. And I think that's why it's so important in verse 33, that they declare, truly, you are the son of God.
This is two chapters before Peter's great confession of Jesus as the Christ. But here, in a flash of understanding, they see it's not just the power of God in Jesus, the power that commands creation and it obeys.
Nor is it just the work of redemption and restoration and rescue, but that it is in their weakness, in their neediness, that Jesus is willing and able to so include his disciples in what he's doing, that we're able to do what he does, by his power.
So when they say, truly, you are the son of God, it's not just a barren statement. It's putting our lives in his hands. It's seeking to do what Jesus does.
[22:10] It's amazing. I mean, this morning, this meeting we're in, it's been full of acts of great worship. And the last thing we did before I got up was we said the creed, where we said, we believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only son of God.

And the wonder is not just that he has come for us, but that he has come to include us in his great work of feeding and healing and saving. And he takes us as weak and inadequate and wavering and hesitating disciples.
And he makes us into those who care. And the more we rely on him, the more we're able to do things that are utterly impossible on our own. Amen.

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