

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time: Aug. 3, 2014

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MT 14: 13-21

“Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand”

Most of us know something about loss. As we grow older we note that some of the sick do not recover. They die. And what follows is the sight of loved ones mourning their loss. This cycle of sickness and death motivates health care practitioners to learn, to adapt and to heal. Of course! Health care workers entered this work to save lives. They see the cycle continues. Some patients recover and others do not. This cycle can sometimes anesthetize the men and women who work in our hospitals. In this week’s Gospel, Jesus invites us to look beyond the cycle of sickness and death to a deeper truth about the purpose of being present to those who are sick and dying. Jesus uses a meal to teach us that health care is about providing dignity.

The Gospel passage from Matthew begins with Jesus hearing of “it” and withdrawing to a deserted place. The “it” is familiar to us. In the passage preceding this one, Jesus learned that his cousin and mentor, John the Baptist, was beheaded by King Herod at the request of Herod’s niece. She danced, Herod swooned and John died. And now Jesus suffered for this triviality. He suffered the type of loss we see all the time such as when a loved one dies unexpectedly.

When Jesus withdrew to the deserted place to mourn, he was followed by crowds. The crowds were suffering, too, from poverty, illness and hopelessness. Jesus shows us his humanity at that moment. He looked at them and “was moved with pity.” He had compassion (from the Latin “to suffer with”). He was moved by the suffering of the crowd - not based on an abstract theology, but because he, too, had suffered a loss so personal and so painful. Because he knew what it was like to suffer a loss, he suffered with them.

Jesus responded to the suffering much like those who in the health care profession do. He could not stay withdrawn and mourn over the death of his cousin. He got to business curing the sick. Doctors and nurses often experience this tension between wanting to stay and mourn with a family over the loss of a loved one, but the needs of the next sick

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patient pulls them forward. They may have personal loss going on in their own families, but the needs of the sick around them, move them to compassion and action.

You who are parents to young children have experienced this when you have lost a parent or a loved one, and yet you must continue to take care of the needs of your small children. You don't have the luxury of turning off those responsibilities and going on a year sabbatical to mourn. Just like Jesus, you work through the cycle of death and sickness and life simultaneously.

But something unexpected also happened in the Gospel story. The crowds did not leave. Why? Weren't they healed? What more did they want from Jesus?

I learned firsthand what the crowds wanted from Jesus while preparing a meal with nurses, physicians, medical assistants and support staff. A physician reported how important it was to hear "thank you" from a patient. A member of the front desk staff told of greeting a timid and nervous patient by making eye contact and providing reassurance. A nurse reminded us that simply listening to a patient could make all the difference. We are all in need of healing. Patients come to the hospital to be cured. But what they truly seek is dignity—the dignity that is found in gratitude, recognition and love.

That is what happens in the Gospel story. The people who came to Jesus experienced compassion and were cared for with dignity. But they need to look Jesus in the eye, show their gratitude, and because they have experienced Jesus' self-giving, they want to share a meal. Remember the feeding of the five thousand begins with people in the crowd giving away their five loaves and a few dried fish. They have been treated with dignity, but they also need and want to express their thanksgiving by also showing compassion and giving part of themselves away. Treating people with dignity empowers them.

In this Gospel passage, Jesus has given us a four-fold strategy for healing. He shows us how experience (the loss he suffered at John's death) can lead to compassion (a deeper understanding of the suffering of others). Moreover, he reminds us that action (the curing of the sick) must always be followed by reflection on that action (as when Jesus recognized that the crowds did not disperse after he cured them). This strategy led Jesus to see that what the crowds needed was more basic than to be cured. They needed to share a meal in which their poverty, reflected in the barrenness of the desert, could be transformed into a feast.

Those who work in health care must employ this strategy. They cannot allow themselves to be anesthetized by suffering for they risk the loss of compassion. When we acknowledge our own suffering we can understand the suffering of others. When health care professionals put their gifts of medical knowledge and training at the service of their patients, to cure them, they must never forget that they yearn for something more. They yearn for dignity. And as the nurses, physicians, medical assistants and support staff taught me, our patients are dignified when our hospital is full of their gratitude, recognition and love.

We can all learn something from this approach. Dignity is about balance between human beings. Dignity is not only about how we extend compassion and help to others, but allowing them the opportunity to say thank you and express their gratitude through their own acts of self-giving. And so the cycle of dignity goes on.