

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason Glombicki
July 19, 2015

“Crowds are a condition of urban life,” John Seabrook wrote in *The New Yorker*. He said, “in subways and sidewalks, in elevators and stores, we pass in and out of [crowds] in the course of a day... Crowds are often viewed as a necessary inconvenience of city living, but there are occasions when we gladly join them, pressing together at raves and rock concerts, at sporting events, victory parades, and big sales.”¹ Being that it’s summer now in Chicago we find ourselves on crowded streets eating, listening to music, and drinking. Sporting events are crowded with fans, streets are crowded with traffic, and the new 606 trail is crowded with people. Our schedules become crowded. Our lives become filled with the necessary and unnecessary activities, plans, and conversations. Our brains, overloaded with information and our lives filled with those forgotten e-mails, friend, and meals. Our lives are crowded.

In today’s Gospel reading we found the apostles and Jesus in the middle of a crowd. They too were missing meals and were tired. And so Jesus told the apostles to go to a deserted place all alone and rest a while. So they got in a boat to escape and when they arrive there was the crowd again. What the heck! They thought they’d get a rest and here are the people that just won’t let them get away. If I were in the boat I’d want to turn around and go back out on the water to escape; so I’m not sure why they stayed except, of course, because of Jesus’ compassion.

As Jesus walks ashore he had a great compassion for the people. Now the Greek verb that we’ve translated here as “having compassion” literally means “to be moved as to one’s bowels, hence to be move to compassion.” And it’s not a pooppy situation that Jesus walks into, but rather the bowls were thought to be the seat of pity and love.² So here we see Jesus visceral response to the crowds. He wasn’t having a logical, theological, or heartfelt response. He was having a gut reaction to the situation of the crowd.

Many people in helping professions have this gut response of compassion. Yet this compassion can fade away with compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue, otherwise known as secondary traumatic stress (STS for short), is a condition characterized by a gradual lessening of compassion over time. This phenomenon is widespread especially in

¹ <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/02/07/crush-point>

² <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2012/07/from-he-to-they-then-back-again.html>

helping fields like social work, medicine, and psychology. Over time the stories, the situations, and the reactions become numbing to the professionals.³

When I worked as a hospital chaplain I found this to be the case. Doctors, nurses, and techs had seen so many cardiac arrests that it became numbing. Cracking ribs with each chest compressions didn't faze them. As a chaplain these things were gut wrenching to watch. There were times when it was 20 hours into my 24-hour shift and I hadn't seen the on-call room once. Going from a suicidal patient wanting to talk about Job, to a lonely Catholic wanting confession, then hustling to a family mourning the loss of a loved one, only to have that interrupted by a sprint to a traumatic stillbirth, and then a mind-blowing four person car crash trauma – I couldn't take it. I was done. I needed a rest.

So I get the apostle's feelings, I bet they had compassion fatigue. After all before this story they're burying John the Baptist who was beheaded after their first mission. Then Jesus decides to take this moment to show compassion – so why now Jesus? We're tired! And while we didn't read what happens right after Jesus has compassion aloud today, the story goes that Jesus instructs the apostles to feed the 5,000-person crowd. The apostles are confused because they're in the desert and there ain't no 7-11 nearby. But Jesus finds a way to feed the 5,000 people abundantly.

And maybe today you're feeling drained. Life is hard. Our schedules get far too crowded. The crowds of life push in on us and almost trample us. Work. Social life. Exercise. Balance seems unattainable. Yet our God looks at the crowded lives we live and has compassion. God responds with love, with a response of grace.

One of the most basic theology questions we ask in our pluralistic society is “how does your God view the world?” With today's gospel we are able to answer that our God views the world with compassion.⁴ We are God's beloved children. In our baptism, just like Donovan's baptism today, we were embraced with love, acceptance, and compassion. Each day we wash our face and we can remember our baptism. And so what do we do when we feel overwhelmed or when compassion fatigue sets in? Can we turn to our God for a moment of rest? Can we come to this place put are electronic devices away and be present? Can we gather to remind us of a world larger and relationship deeper than an amorphous crowd?

During my time as a chaplain I most certainly felt burned out by compassion fatigue. And that's not the best place to be as a crucial part of being a chaplain is to be present with people in the midst of that emotion as a reminder of our God's presence. When I'd walk away from the hospital I'd seek out crowds with relatively healthy folks. I wasn't sure why I gravitated to them, but recently I read that visual and kinesthetic reminders of our lives

³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/somatic-psychology/201207/compassion-fatigue>

⁴ Feasting on the Word.

outside work are important. These things help us to stay connected or to reconnect with a caregivers' identity. So things like placing pictures of your family at work or even favorite artwork can remind you of your expansive identity.⁵

For me two places were key to reestablishing my identity and coping with compassion fatigue. First was the local graduate student bar at Yale. It wasn't that I drank away my sorrows or that I escaped reality. Rather, as weird as it sounds, to be gathered with friends in a crowded room and look out at people who looked relatively healthy reminded me of the larger picture. It reminded me that at the hospital I saw the 1% of trauma and death while most of New Haven was doing pretty darn well. The crowd gave me life.

The second place of great importance for me was my church community. There in church was the melting pot of individuals – young, old, queer, straight, Asian, Latino, white, single, married – in that church we gathered to recognize our humanity and mortality, there we gathered with compassion and hope, and there we assembled to give thanks for the goodness of life – for baptismal waters of grace, for food that nourishes our bodies, and for a God who chooses compassion. There we marked the important transitions of life, from baptisms to thanksgivings and goodbyes. There in that crowd I found life.

So my friends, I've said all that to emphasize this: life is crowded - our lives, our streets, and our days. Yet our God walks into those crowded situations with compassion to bring life. Take time to rest and reconnect with our God this week. Notice your connection with God and others in the midst of the crowd. Be restored. Then, be sent as a beacon of God's loving compassion to the entire world. Amen.

⁵ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/somatic-psychology/201207/compassion-fatigue>