

Compassion as Symbolic Action

John 21:1-17, 19b

John's Gospel offers an unusual post-resurrection story of Jesus' disciples' response to his death, a story that can challenge and even inspire us today. The disciples, in this story, had gone back to work, resumed business as usual, and returned to familiar activities. This is a story featuring a number of actions that were symbolic as well as practical? What were some of the symbolic actions in the story?

Peter went fishing.. He returned to his work after experiencing Jesus' crucifixion and two previous resurrection appearances, not sure what difference following Jesus had made for him? Sometimes we respond to a clarity of call or profound inspiration by going back to a familiar routine, letting the feeling just pass.

Jesus' led the disciples to discover literally a boatload of abundance in their work. As result of knowing Christ, they came to recognize a deeper calling for their lives. We can find, on our spiritual journey, a deeper sense of the meaning of our work or, sometimes, a call to new areas of work that will provide more meaning and purpose to our lives.

Jesus fixed breakfast for them as a reminder of the importance of community, of breaking bread together, and of all people having enough food to live. Then Jesus put Peter on the spot. He didn't just ask, "do you love me?" He asked, "do you love me more than these?" probably meaning *more than these* other disciples. He asked him this not just once, but three times: "Do you love me?" Each time Jesus' word was the Greek *agape*. Peter, who had denied even knowing Jesus, replied, "You know that I love you." Each time he used the Greek *phileos*. Christ asks the full measure of love and commitment from each of us, but accepts the love we can give.

Jesus requested an action from Peter, one that was practical, yet highly symbolic. He told him, "feed my lambs," "tend my sheep," then "feed my sheep." Though much has been made by some theologians about the nuances of these three requests, they are essentially the same: work for benefit of all people. Christ requests of us concrete acts of compassion as clear and symbolic actions.

I want to change the world yet find I can't. I long to fix the problems I see around me and find they overwhelm me. I can't fix them. I can't even cope with them. Sometimes my own problems overwhelm me. I have a strong desire to heal the hurt of the poor, the dispossessed, the left out, and the battered. I try to heal that hurt and discover it will not be healed. I am hungry to meet the needs of a broken world, but again and again I am betrayed by my own needs.

There are times I despair of making a difference in my life, of making a difference in the world for the values I hold: justice, compassion, inclusiveness. In that despair, I'm drawn to a light of hope. There are many actions I take in my life, attempting to fix or heal, restore what is broken. Some of them make a small difference in the world, but most of them do not. There is a symbolic dimension to these actions, however, that actually makes them powerful. I act in faith that God desires to have brokenness mended, problems brought to resolution, and hurts healed. The power comes when I act by faith that my attempts are in synch with the movement of God's Spirit in the universe.

Our lives are filled with symbolic actions. When a congregation gathers to worship, it acts in the belief that its prayers and songs of praise are one with the heavenly chorus surrounding the throne of grace. When we give our money, time, and effort to right a wrong, change an unjust system, or meet a need, perhaps the biggest difference our actions make is to identify us as being on the side of justice, compassion, and inclusiveness. When we act in cooperation with others, we proclaim that the life and nature of God is relational. We are most powerful when we identify ourselves with God's dream of *Shalom* and act because of that identity.

The risen Christ challenged his disciples to trust their calling enough to push some boundaries, live in some tensions, and act with compassion. The Spirit challenges us today to engage in symbolic action, to trust our own calling, push some boundaries, live in some tensions, and act with compassion.

Today we are observing a *Compassion Sunday*, recognizing the opportunities we have to sponsor a child in a third world country through Compassion International or another similar organization. Having a compassion child can be a powerful symbolic action, one you may choose to take. We follow a Christ who waits for us on the riverbank, who prepares spiritual nourishment and provides sustenance for our lives. And Christ asks us again and again, "Do you love me?" If you do, then you will act on behalf of a scattered, confused, hurting, and misguided humanity.

God has shown us what is good: "to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8) Christ calls us to take action knowing its power will be largely symbolic. Do you have a sense of what God is calling you to do? How will you feed the lambs and tend the flock? How will you care for those in need of guidance and hope? How will you act with compassion so that the world can see the love of Christ in your love and in your life?

Those first disciples did not act alone. They organized people around them, those with a common vision and commitment. We organize ourselves as church to support our action and encourage our commitment. As we encounter the living Christ in our work and our worship, let us not just return business as usual, life as familiar. But let us find ways to engage in actions that are both symbolic and significant--ways of being and doing that will place us in the flow of God's Spirit today, ways of living with compassion. Only actions such as these can ultimately transform the world.