

July 21, Ordinary 16B (Mark 6:30-34, 53-56)

An exhausted Jesus responds to the crowd with compassion. I think that's a miracle.

by [Joanna Harader](#) in the [July 2024](#) issue

It's a question many pastors dread when we are chatting at the gym or sitting on the plane or standing in line at the grocery store: "So, what do you do?" There are, of course, several creative responses to this question, from the basically true "director of a nonprofit" to the tongue-in-cheek "carpenter's apprentice" to an unintelligible grunt and a quick "How about that local sports ball team?" Only the bravest among us will square our shoulders, look the inquisitor in the eye, and say, "I am a pastor."

Sometimes, particularly for those of us who don't present as male, this revelation elicits hostility. Other times people aren't so much hostile as simply awkward; they try not to swear and start stumbling over explanations of why they haven't been to church lately. The truth is that I don't care about their swearing or their church attendance, and I now have zero chance of a normal, meaningful conversation with this person.

Despite the discomfort of hostile and awkward reactions when people find out what I do, for me the most difficult response is enthusiasm. Sometimes when a person learns that I am a pastor, they want me to be *their* pastor. They tell me about their spouse's infidelity right there in the locker room, when I have on fewer clothes than I generally like to wear for such conversations. They want me to explain the finer points of Anabaptist theology as we fly from Kansas City to Orlando. They ask me to pray for their cousin who has brain cancer while they are bagging my groceries.

It's not that I don't want to listen deeply or explain theology or pray for people. It's just that I've been doing a lot of all of that lately and was hoping for a little bit of a break while I picked up some Frosted Mini-Wheats. I long to get away from the people who see me only in my ministry role, as someone who will listen, help, guide, teach, comfort, and heal them. Along with the disciples, I relish Jesus' invitation to "come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

Notice how insistent Jesus is about this invitation. First he says, “come away,” then he clarifies that “away” means “to a deserted place.” And just in case there’s any doubt, he specifies that in this deserted place the disciples will be all by themselves. Finally, in case anyone has missed the point, the narrator confirms that “they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.”

Got it? Away. Deserted place. *Alone*. Sounds lovely, right? Except that it turns out the crowds are there waiting for them, because the people recognize Jesus and his disciples and hurry ahead to meet them in the now not-so-deserted place.

The gospels are chock full of miracles, and there are a lot of them right here in the sixth chapter of Mark: feeding the multitude, walking on water, healing the sick. Jesus performs wonders upon wonders. And right here, when Jesus’ plans for getting away and being alone are ruined by this needy crowd, is a miracle we often overlook: Jesus has compassion for them.

Compassion. In the midst of his own exhaustion, he recognizes the weariness of those in the crowd. In his own need for renewal, he recognizes their need for healing. In his own longing for time away with God, he recognizes their longing to connect more deeply with their Creator.

Jesus responds to the enthusiasm of the crowd not with exasperation but with compassion. A miracle indeed. It takes a certain spiritual groundedness to recognize when you need to get away to a deserted place alone for a while. It takes an even deeper spiritual groundedness to respond with compassion toward those who mess up your plans for solitude.

There are times when I just want a break from being a pastor (or a parent, or a generally responsible adult) and people keep showing up with all of their exhaustion and brokenness and longing. To be honest, my initial response in these situations is not always compassion. As I grow and mature in my faith, I trust my compassion will grow as well.

In the meantime, though, I realize that I don’t always have to be the one showing up with compassion. Sometimes I’m the one in the crowd following Jesus around demanding his attention, his healing, his wisdom. I’m the one reaching out in exhaustion and brokenness and longing, trying to touch even the fringe of Jesus’ cloak. And Jesus always, always, reaches back in love.