August 2, 2026 Prpr 13 Let Us Be Good To Each Other

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey St. Matthias Episcopal Church, Minocqua, Wisconsin

Some of most tender, compassionate words ever written can be found in C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, a book series that Lewis said he wrote for children and adults, once adults are old enough to appreciate children's literature again. For example, in one of the books titled *The Magician's Nephew* there is an exchange between a boy from our world named Digory and Aslan, the Lion, who we know in our world as Jesus. Digory had been sent by his uncle on a magical adventure to rescue his friend and ended up in the world of Narnia at the moment of its creation. However, he was responsible for bringing evil into Narnia, and Aslan told Digory he was going to have to help deal with that evil. Instead of taking responsibility and agreeing to help, Digory asked Aslan to cure his dying mother. When Aslan didn't immediately respond, Digory looked into the eyes of the Lion and saw they were filled with tears. That's when Aslan spoke the tender words that connect to today's Gospel: "My son, I know. Grief is great. Only you and I know that in this land yet. Let us be good to each other."

When C.S. Lewis wrote the words "Grief is great.", he didn't mean great as in high quality or super-duper, he meant large in size or scope. He was referring to the immense heaviness of grief, and how for those experiencing it, grief becomes a huge part of life, because grief is love on the other side of loss.

Grief is most likely why Jesus got into a boat by himself and took off for a lonely, deserted place in today's Gospel. Because just before that, Jesus had learned about the tragic and violent death of John the Baptizer. John was many things: he was Jesus' cousin, the son of Jesus' mother's cousin Elizabeth, who Mary went to visit when they were both pregnant with their impossible babies; John was considered the last of the Old Testament style prophets who proclaimed Jesus' arrival as the Messiah, and a leader of his own ministry who could have potentially been a colleague. We don't know what their relationship was like, but after hearing about John's death, Jesus seemed to need to be alone.

Perhaps for a lot of reasons. To grieve in private, away from the demanding crowds and disciples and the eavesdropping, spying religious elite. Perhaps Jesus wanted to regroup; in the Gospels, the death of John the Baptizer signaled a shift in Jesus' ministry to focusing on how he is the Messiah through his miracles, teachings and parables. It makes sense Jesus would need time to pray and reflect in private to figure out what his ministry was going to be like and maybe to consider how it could lead to the same fate as John. After all, any significant loss – a spouse, child, friend, neighbor, a job, home, a pet, even when a business or institution closes, that loss is a big change that requires adapting and learning to live differently. That is why C.S. Lewis wrote grief is great.

However, in today's Gospel we read that the only alone time Jesus got was the boat ride. When he arrived at his destination a great crowd was already there to meet him. Again, the word *great* here means large in number and scope. Jesus didn't get back in the boat and paddle away, he went into the crowd. Because he had compassion for them.

This is no small thing. Jesus didn't feel sorry for the folks in the crowd. He didn't pity them. Perhaps, like Aslan he recognized their grief; their losses caused by death, illness, poverty, alienation, or the prejudices of their times. Together they knew grief is great. So, Jesus went among the crowd because they suffered grief together. That's compassion, being good to each other. Being together to heal, learn from each other, delight in each other, and it turns out, to share a remarkable meal together.

Speaking of which, there are lots of ways to interpret Jesus' miraculous feeding of the crowds. It appears in all four Gospels which makes Biblical scholars believe this event actually happened. It's goodness has inspired millions of churches to start and participate in feeding ministries, like our ecumenical ministry of Tom's Table. It has also inspired other kinds of ministries that offer emergency help to anyone in need like our ecumenical Caritas ministry. Many scholars also note this meal foreshadows Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples and the Holy Eucharist which we will share in a short

while. It has inspired lots of interpretations by commentators and preachers who offer suggestions as to how the miracle actually happened. It's hard to say for sure except that what God does with what we give God is mysterious and powerful. Perhaps because God is not a distant superhero in the sky, God is a God who knows grief is great and meets us and is present with us in our grief which somehow creates compassion.

Perhaps the popular or best-known part of that meal in today's Gospel is the leftovers. Those twelve full baskets that suggest the reward we'll get when we share and encourages us to live the philosophy of abundance. But those leftovers can distract us from what came before. Especially Jesus' response to his disciples when they suggested he send the crowds away at the end of the day. There could be many reasons for their suggestion including concern that businesses back in town might close before the crowd could get there to get something to eat. But Jesus considered the disciples' idea by turning it into an invitation to participate in God's economy of love by giving everything they had, which meant going hungry themselves, knowing that it wouldn't be enough. Yet in taking what little they had, lifting it to God, blessing it, breaking it, then giving it back to the disciples to give away, Jesus empowered the disciples to enter the crowd in a way they hadn't before. As part of it. After seeing this, did the crowd produce small amounts of food they had brought with them for the disciples to lift up to God, bless, break and give back which is where the surplus came from? Maybe. We don't really know. But much like in the book The Magician's Nephew, Digory, like the disciples, eventually accepted Aslan's invitation to help correct the damage he had done, which led to a relationship with Aslan and even more good things I will not spoil for those who have not read the book.

Perhaps what matters is out of grief the compassionate invitation to be good to each other emerged not because one group has more money or stuff or prestige than another group and should share it out of charitable obligation, but because grief is an equalizer. Which means compassion – being good to each other - isn't something to be done because Jesus said so, but instead is a form of collaboration, working together with Jesus in loving God and our neighbors. Maybe that's worshiping together, sharing a meal, playing together, repairing breaches in relationships, giving space when someone needs time alone, advocating for the oppressed, sharing Holy Communion, there are lots of ways to lead a compassionate life. Especially when we can grieve together, not to stay stuck in sorrow, but to help each other learn how to carry grief into what is next so that it becomes compassion instead of resentment or bitterness, compassion we can pass on. Each and every one of us has known grief. Sometimes grief can be deeply painful. So, as Aslan said, let us be good to each other. Doing so may just reveal Christ and healing presence of resurrection life in our midst.