

God Really Does Care

“When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick” Matthew 14:14.

Have you ever wondered, ‘Does God really care?’ Watching that most recent bill take the bank account dangerously close to zero. Sitting in the hospital room for the umpteenth time this year. Feeling frustrated, confused, dejected, exasperated as individuals in our community, in our own families, maybe even we, ourselves, lack shelter and support. Aching at the graveside of that loved one whose loss turned life upside down. Does God really care?

Caught up in intense and personal struggles, it’s hard to accept any answer that doesn’t immediately address the needs and concerns of the situation that has taken up so much time, energy and focus. When the challenging circumstances continue, despite prayer, despite great efforts, despite tremendous sacrifice, it’s tempting to try and provide some sort of excuse. Sure, God cares but this time He’s too occupied with other things. Yeah, God cares, but He’s too focused on the future to act in the moment. God usually cares, but there’s too few resources for anything to be done. God often cares, but those involved are too incapable to accomplish what’s needed. Ultimately these excuses can lead to a somber resignation, sure God may care about others, but He’s unable to care about me.

I think you and I both realize that there are so many reasons people doubt God’s care. And whatever might be your current reason, this is right where you need to be to be reminded and assured that God does care and He cares for you. The account we heard from Matthew’s Gospel, the feeding of the 5,000, reveals to us God’s care not because it directly answers the specific care we think we need for whatever situation might be weighing on us. This account reveals to us God’s care because it pulls us away from what we perceive as God’s lack of care. This weekend’s Gospel reading addresses the excuses we can make for God when He doesn’t answer as we want and, in our disappointment, we begin to wonder, ‘does God really care?’ Looking at four different aspects of this miracle, our God shows us that He really does care.

The first aspect for us to consider speaks to the excuse that God is too occupied to care. At the beginning of the reading, we are told that Jesus has heard something which leads Him to step back. From the previous verses, we learn that Jesus had heard about the death of John the Baptist. For Jesus, John’s death was the loss of a relative, the loss of a partner in ministry, and the loss of someone whom He had created. So, His withdrawal makes a lot of sense to us as we assume He seeks to grieve this loss.

Jesus’ desire to withdraw to grieve shows us that He’s not too occupied to care. He’s hurting for this loss. While we might be tempted to think that His inaction to save John the Baptist from death meant He didn’t care, His withdrawal tells us the opposite. He did care even if He didn’t intervene like we know He could. And as He deals with this loss personally, He’s also not too occupied to care for the crowd that surrounds Him. Healing their sick, extending to them, despite His own needs, Jesus doesn’t limit His care because He’s too occupied with something else.

The second aspect we’ll look at in this reading deals with the excuse that God is too future focused. It’s easy to hear everything about God’s plan for eternity and take that as a gloss over the present. The eternal perspective that God gives us in the Bible doesn’t mean that He’s unconcerned about the present. Our God cares about the present just as much as He does the future. While His promises about the life to come are so important, they don’t keep Him from addressing problems of this present life.

When the disciples come urging Jesus to dismiss the crowds to go home and take care of themselves, He says that they don’t need to leave. Instead of dismissing the crowd’s present need because He’s already worked all day and has bigger ministry goals coming up in the future than merely feeding them, He desires to care for them in that moment. Jesus’ eventual path to the cross and empty tomb doesn’t keep Him from providing in the present, He’s not too future focused to care.

The third aspect from this reading highlights the excuse that too few resources are available for God to act. I think it’s easy for any of us to assess a situation by what is lacking. We’re missing this. We need that. We can’t do this or that because we’re going to run out of what we need. So, like the disciples in our reading, we think God’s care is limited by what we see as insufficient means. When called upon to feed the massive crowd, the disciples desperately gather what little they can find, five loaves and two fish. To them it looks like too little too

late and yet because Jesus cares so much He turns it into more than enough. Miraculously, by Jesus' care what had been a perceived lack becomes a great abundance; Jesus' care isn't limited by too few resources.

The final aspect for us to consider speaks to the excuse that God's care is hindered by people who are too incapable to help. Whether we look at ourselves or others in the Church, it's easy to believe that someone isn't up to the task that God has in mind. Our own struggles and sins convince us that God can't use us for His purposes. Others' struggles and sins tempt us to dismiss the possibility that God could use them for His purposes.

Yet, when we look at the disciples from our text, we see a different story. These twelve, sinful men aren't up to Jesus' challenge of feeding 5,000+ people. Even as they scramble to come up with something, their attempts fall short. However, despite their inability, as servants of Jesus, He makes use of seemingly incapable individuals. Because of Jesus, these disciples really do follow His command to feed the crowd, not because of their efforts but because of Jesus' efforts at work through them. Jesus uses the Twelve to hand out the blessing He provides; God can use people who seem too incapable to reveal His care.

This weekend's account of the feeding of the 5,000 is an amazing account. Truly, the miracle act is stunning on its own, but what surrounds this action reveals something even more significant, the depth of God's compassion. Our God, Jesus, isn't too occupied, too future focused, too limited by a few resources or incapable people, to display gut-wrenching care for His creation, for His people. And what this one account highlights for us isn't a one-off or an exception to the norm. No, it's one of many accounts throughout the Bible pointing to the reality that God really does care so much He's willing to go to the grave and back to demonstrate this gut-wrenching care.

Here's the crucial element to this account and any other Bible account highlighting God's care, it's pointing us to His care that He ultimately displays on the cross and with the empty tomb. For when we see this account of Jesus feeding 5000+ people funneling us toward His death and resurrection, we are shown that God's care isn't merely a thing of the past, but rather it's ongoing, it's enduring for you and me personally. For the same Jesus who wasn't too occupied, too future focused, too limited by a few resources, too surrounded by incapable people, to care for that massive crowd, isn't too occupied, too future focused, too limited by a few resources, too surrounded by incapable people to deliver the blessing and benefits of His death and resurrection to you and me right now.

In fact, that's exactly what He's doing for you in this moment, in this service. From the moment, you've entered this space to the moment you leave, your God is declaring to you that He really does care. He cares so much that He allows you to call upon His powerful name. He cares so much that He delivers complete forgiveness for all your sins especially the ones that are weighing you down this week. Yes, He delivers forgiveness, life and salvation through the seemingly limited means of words, water, wafer, and wine handed out by sinful and incapable men He's called to be pastors. Yes, your God cares so much for you that He sends you out from this place with His name and blessing that aren't rendered ineffective as soon as you get in your car and head home, no His name and blessing go with you, Your God, goes with you to care for you in this week ahead.

And as you anticipate His personal and enduring care throughout this coming week, I want you to tether your anticipation to His Word, specifically to the words found in Psalm 136. While you may not recognize this psalm by number, you may recognize it by its continuous refrain, "for his steadfast love endures forever." Daily read or listen to some or all of this psalm, maybe in the morning before you get going for the day, or perhaps at the dinner table together as a family, or even at night before you fall asleep.

As this refrain echoes throughout your week, I'd encourage you to borrow the psalmist's pattern for your own prayers going something like this: to him who is in control even when my finances are a mess, for His steadfast love endures forever; to him who is at work through my medical team even when my results are unclear, for his steadfast love endures forever; to him who continues to be at work to provide even when so many are in need, for His steadfast love endures forever; to him who knows the loss of a loved one, for his steadfast love endures forever; to him who really does care for me even when I can't see it; for his steadfast love endures forever. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan