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Romans 5:1-8

Matthew 9:35-10:8

FUEL FOR OUR JOURNEY

There is a television commercial out these days where members of a marching band are shown and then we see the words, “Fueled by spirit.” Next, we see a ballet dancer and up pop the words, “Fueled by expression.” Later on there’s a young child running on a beach pulling an overhead kite on a string – “Fueled by joy.” We can’t buy spirit, expression, or joy. So the last words tell us who paid for the commercial when the message comes up, “Fueled by Valero.”¹ I don’t usually turn to gasoline company ads for sermon inspiration, but whoever came up with this commercial realized that there are certain things that money can’t buy that motivate and inspire us, that move us and fuel our journey through life.

Our passage from Matthew describes Jesus in the midst of a lot of activity. He is going all around teaching in synagogues, he is proclaiming the good news of God’s reign, he is described as curing every disease and sickness. It sounds like all of that could be overwhelming. What then fueled Jesus for this work, this ministry? Matthew tells us that when he saw the crowds, he saw them clearly enough so that he was filled with compassion for them, because he could see they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. He looked deeply enough at their physical and non-physical need for his teaching, proclamation, and healing, so that his compassion flowed and fueled his actions toward them.

I was blessed to get to go to Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond for the major part of my formal training to be an ordained minister. Where there are deficiencies in my ministerial skills, Union is not to be blamed, as it had then

and has now a wonderful faculty and curriculum. As students, a lot of us ate lunch at the cafeteria on campus. It was a small enough group that we all knew everybody. Around those tables we would discuss the sermon we had heard in chapel or the lecture we had heard in class or the great issues of the day or the not-so-great issues of the day. This was the place where many of us experienced the greatest sense of community during the seminary experience. It was a place where I felt strong emotional support and real warmth.

Every once in a while, there was an older woman who lived near the seminary, who would come to eat lunch at the cafeteria. That certainly was not the norm, that someone from outside the seminary community would come there to eat, as it wasn't known for its quality of food. Perhaps someone in charge figured that if we could be grateful to God for that food, a certain amount of spiritual training had been accomplished. This woman was also outside the norm in that she had some physical mannerisms and a style of dressing that were different. Ms. Lily was her name and she would get her lunch tray and pay for it and then she would walk slowly through the tables where all the students were eating, graciously waiting for someone to make eye-contact with her, as if that were the needed invitation to be seated at a particular table. Sometimes she stood for quite a while, as a large number of the future leaders of a church founded by Jesus stared down at our plates, hoping she would go elsewhere. One day, when Ms. Lily had been standing for a while, a person at my table made eye contact with her and nodded for her to come join us. The conversation changed, but that wasn't all bad.

In fact, I would say that even though Ms. Lily wasn't a part of the faculty of the seminary, that she helped some of us grow, even grudgingly, in a vital aspect of being a follower of Jesus Christ, of sharing the same kind of warmth we had experienced and enjoyed, of being fueled by compassion instead of some lesser motivator. Compassion is not all that fuels the part of our faith journey that finds expression in service and care, but it was key for Jesus, and he is supposed to be the One we follow.

I'm well aware of the term 'compassion fatigue.' People can get to feeling overwhelmed when the needs seem to be larger than the resources, when the unmet demands outnumber the energy. But I also think that our compassion might never grow to a robust level in the first place when we stay exclusively in our comfort zones and miss the opportunities to connect with people right where they are.

Dorothy McGuire was a relatively famous actress from an earlier generation. When she was starring in a production of Tennessee Williams' play, "The Night of the Iguana," something happened before the play ever started that a reviewer wrote about more so than the play itself. Here's from part of the review: *At about the time the performance was scheduled to begin, a woman in the audience—a stout, middle-aged woman in a blue print dress—suddenly began shouting, "Start the show! Start the show! I want to see Dorothy McGuire! I love Dorothy McGuire."*

The people sitting next to her were quickly evacuated to other seats; usherettes, and someone who must have been the house manager came to reason with her, but she continued to shout. After a moment of shock, the audience began to get ugly, applauding and laughing derisively... "Listen, you old bag, get out!" somebody shouted at her. "Throw her out and start the show!" shouted somebody else. Some people began to boo the shouters. "All I want to see," said the woman in the blue dress firmly, "is Dorothy McGuire, and then I will leave."

Finally, Miss McGuire herself appeared, crossed the stage to where the woman was sitting, spoke to her soothingly and hugged her. And the woman, who had pulled back when anyone had touched her, quietly allowed Miss McGuire to lead her away... As they crossed the stage toward the exit, Miss McGuire—who had met the situation with remarkable poise and grace and kindness—paused and said to the audience, "I'd just like to introduce another fellow human being." ²

There is a need for lives that are fueled by compassion these days – compassion for those with whom we disagree, compassion for those who lack some of the blessings we have known, compassion for those who are a bit quirky. God has the gift of compassion in abundance for us. If we dare open ourselves to such a gift, we will grow in our capacity to have our lives be fueled by the same thing that fueled Jesus’ life and ministry, and we’ll be closer to being ready when our Lord introduces us to that next fellow human being.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRWhrJBTBDI>

² Shared in a sermon by Patrick Willson, the review was written by Julius Novick, “Mr. Williams and the Crazy Lady,” The Village Voice, December 27, 1972, p. 73-74.