

**“Running on Empty”**

**Matthew 14: 13-21**

**August 3, 2008**

I'm sure that much like me, you were shocked and saddened to hear the news of a man who opened fire on the congregation of the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville last Sunday morning. The man accused of pulling the trigger that morning is Jim D. Adkisson, a 58-year-old truck driver who was on the verge of losing his food stamps. He had 76 rounds with him when he entered the church and pulled a shotgun from a guitar case during a children's performance of the musical "Annie." At the end of the morning eight people had been shot, leaving two dead and six wounded — four of them listed in critical shape.

In a press release, Police Chief Sterling Owen said, *“It appears that what brought him to this horrible event was his lack of being able to obtain a job, his frustration over that, and his stated hatred for the liberal movement.”* Additionally, longtime acquaintance Carol Smallwood told the Knoxville News Sentinel that Adkisson was a loner who hates *“blacks, gays and anyone different from him.”*

Chief Owen also added that in a letter found on the seat of Mr. Adkisson's SUV, *“he indicated ... that he expected to be in there (the church) shooting people until the police arrived and that he fully expected to be killed by the responding police. He certainly intended to take a lot of casualties.”*

This tragic story is but another example of a certain sense of hopelessness and despair that seems to be running rampant in our world today. As I shared in my Pastor's Page for our August newsletter, it seems that people everywhere are being bombarded with bad and stress-inducing news and conversation about high gas prices, the mortgage crisis, and a war that simply will not go away. In the case of Jim Adkisson, as indicated by the words of the police chief, these feelings of frustration with the state of the world turned to hatred of his neighbor. And the anger and misunderstanding that he experienced caused him to turn his back, close the doors to his heart, and try to make the world go away ... eventually with a shotgun in hand. Emotionally, spiritually and socially starved, Jim Adkisson appears to be an empty man.

Interestingly enough, our Gospel story this morning is a familiar tale that on

its surface might seem to be about abundance as Jesus and his disciples miraculously provided dinner to more than 5,000 people. On closer inspection, however, we discover that Matthew's tale of the feeding of the 5,000 is also marked by a certain sense of emptiness as well.

First of all there are the empty stomachs of the 5,000 who, like Mr. Adkisson, didn't know where their next meal was coming from. Then there were the empty hearts of the disciples who, when presented with the needs of their neighbors, desired to turn their backs and send the hungry away.

Even Jesus himself showed a certain sense of emptiness in this story. The passage begins with the words, "*Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart.*" [Vs. 13] Do you know what it was that Jesus had just heard about? That's right, Jesus had just been told that one of the most important people in his life, John the Baptist, the man who had baptized him in the Jordan river, had been beheaded by order of King Herod.

You see, when Jesus withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place, he was showing us something of his human side. Like most people when they receive disastrous or catastrophic news, he wanted to get away from everyone and everything. He wanted to clear his head and his calendar. He wanted some peace and quiet with no distractions, no interruptions, and most of all, no people. Jesus was feeling empty inside.

As Matthew tells us, right when Jesus was feeling his driest, emptiest and most heartbroken, right when he felt that he most needed to be left alone, the people showed up. And not just a few people, but 5,000 men, besides women and children. And they all showed up to that lonely place to which Jesus was trying to escape, and it wasn't so lonely anymore.

But here's where Jesus' story diverges from that of the 5,000, the disciples, and Jim Adkisson. For while you and I, or the average person on the street, might respond with anger and frustration to this blatant invasion of privacy, instead of turning his back on the people and sending them away as the disciples suggested, Jesus embraced them. And instead of resenting the people for their needs and their lack of consideration for what he might have been feeling or needing at that particular point in time, Jesus offered them compassion. In Matthew's words, "*As he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick.*" [Vs. 14]

And the compassion that Jesus showed those hungry people changed everyone and everything. Jesus' compassionate response in the face of his own need fed and healed the people, and offered the disciples inspiration and an example of the way in which genuine compassion can turn things around. There wasn't one single man, woman, or child there that day whose attitude wasn't improved and whose life wasn't changed by Jesus' act and example of compassion.

And the same is true for you and me as well. We all at one time or another have to face circumstances in life that leave us feeling empty and dry. We have all at some point in time endured a seemingly endless series of calamities and catastrophes and thought that things couldn't get any worse, only to find out that indeed they could. Somewhere, sometime, every single one of us has come to the end of the rope, tied a knot, held on for dear life, and wondered how much longer it would be possible to hold on. At some point we have all felt like we were running on empty — our heart, our mind and our soul each one feeling more drained and tired than the last. And chances are that most of us are probably going to know times like that again. Perhaps we are even enduring times like that right now. It's inevitable — hard times are going to come our way. But what's not inevitable is our response when those inevitable hard times do arrive.

One option is to circle the wagons, close our hearts, and turn our backs on the world. This option, as we have seen all too abundantly, leads only to even more pain, darkness and heartache. However, inspired by Jesus' example, we might also choose another alternative. And that alternative is compassion. Compassion is the choice to refocus our attention from our own problems to the suffering and needs of others. It is the desire to heal our own hearts through the healing of others. For as the Dalai Lama once said, *“If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”*

Are you running on empty? Like Popeye, do you feel like you are standing all you can stand and you can't stand no more? Turn away from your pain and turn toward your God. Open your heart and your hands to all the folks around you that are desperate for the love and care that you can give them. Replace your concern for yourself with compassion for others, and, like the baskets full of leftovers on that Galilean hillside, you'll quickly discover that

when filled with God's loving compassion there'll be more than enough to  
fill us all.  
Amen.