Six weeks ago, we began a small journey together, to prepare for Compassion Week. “A lever and a place to stand” we called it, calling to mind an ancient phrase. We have recalled that deepening our central convictions, firming our stance in the ground beneath our feet, is what multiplies and connects our small acts of service, what changes the world.

Compassion Week concluded a week ago, last Sunday. Two thousand volunteers participated in almost a hundred projects, here on our campus and out in the community. You’ll hear more about what was accomplished, and we’ll celebrate all of it together today over lunch, at the Compassion Week celebration. We’ll honor one another and welcome those who joined us just for the week. We’ll pause and thank those who led us with generosity—offering their amazing gifts of organization and creativity and communication, building relationships with our community partners, keeping clear heads in the midst of a big, unwieldy project. All of you who were involved in putting Compassion Week together—Jan McDaniel, Steve Tani, Nadine Tadeo, Marissa Kobylenski, Leslie Carmichael, many others—we thank you. And we will keep thanking you through this day, and I hope through the next weeks and months, for your inspired leadership, for not giving up in all those moments when the work felt hard and complicated.

This morning, our purpose is a little different from what will happen this afternoon. We gather here, now, as people of a common faith. A people who are The Church—called not only to be in service but to create opportunities so that others might serve too. The Church, not only busy with the work of our hands, but attentive, listening, aware that what we have done is mostly to put ourselves—this church, this community—into the posture of serving one another, Knowing that it is from this posture that the world is transformed. That this is how we are transformed.

There are no doubt a hundred stories from Compassion Week 2017 that would delight us with its success. Keep telling those stories for weeks, maybe even all year. I know I will, because I am still marveling at you, my church. At how many of you were here to do not just one or two projects during the week, but many. It looked to me like some of you were camping here, going home only to shower. I am marveling at how much ingenuity and creativity there was in the projects, so that everyone could participate. At the scene of Rise Against Hunger in Creekside last Sunday—hundreds of people working together—every age, different religions and cultures, friends and strangers.

This morning, though, I want you to hear just one particular story of transformation.

Last week was an odd, interesting time for Compassion Week to fall in. It followed weeks of hurricanes and floods, terrible earthquakes, weeks in which we’d heard news of people killed, displaced from their homes, unable to access even food and water. Even while you were signing up to volunteer for service locally, your church asked you to step up and send money to UMCOR, for disaster relief in other states and even other countries.
And then, just as the week began, on Sunday night into Monday morning, we began to hear reports of the shooting in Las Vegas—the deadliest mass shooting in the history of the United States. People we know—families, our Starfire kids, friends of friends—were affected directly. Even more importantly, people God knows and loves were there—hurt, killed, injured, grieved, called on to be first responders.

On Monday afternoon the Ministry Team talked. This terrible thing that happened felt like an important moment, significant enough that the church needed to speak. The Church needs to be a voice in moments like this, we thought, offering not only comfort and hope, but courage—a common resolve that events like Las Vegas cannot silence the voice of faith and hope. That a renewed commitment to our humanity was called for now.

But it was such a busy week! Our whole congregation and staff were fully engaged in Compassion Week activities. Could we spare the time, the energy, the resources, to put another service on the calendar?

Yes. We had to, and we did. A week ago Thursday we held a “vigil for hope and healing after Las Vegas”. Lay leaders from our Bold Service and Social Justice area reached out across the community. They helped us invite clergy from other religions to join in leadership. They marshaled resources to offer anyone who felt called to continue the work against gun violence. The service was beautiful, full of the kind of music this church is known for, led by your pastors and a rabbi from Beth Am. It felt to me like sort of a potluck worship service—Everyone did what they could, brought the gifts they had to share.

And then this last Monday morning, just as Compassion Week was ending, we woke up to news of fires just to the north of us. All of us know someone in Napa and Sonoma counties. Our sister churches—particularly First United Methodist Church in Santa Rosa—were directly impacted. They had already opened their doors to those who had been evacuated, many of whom had instantly lost their homes. I felt a little nervous. I wanted us to be helpful, but I wasn’t sure we had the resources after a week in which it seemed like LAUMC had poured out everything it had into serving this community.

But you did it again, LAUMC. When the call came for more volunteers in the shelters, this church sent two teams in for 24-hour shifts. Because we had just packed health kits the week before, we had hundreds of them available to take to those who had left home with nothing in their hands. Bob Lee offered to pack the church’s trailer with food and cook for the evacuees as long as necessary.

This is who you are. This is the kind of hands-out, ready-to-be-called-on church you have become.

Do you remember, a couple of Sundays ago, we talked about a parable Jesus told, of a great banquet. The initial guests made excuses, so the host sent his servant out to invite everyone he could find on the streets to enjoy the lavish dinner he had laid out. Right after that story, in the very next chapter of the Gospel of Luke, is the story of the Prodigal Son, where Jesus likens God to a father who runs out of his house to meet his son who had turned his back on his family and
run away with his inheritance. A father who is so ecstatic about his son’s return that he spends more money on him, throws a party like no one has ever seen before. In that same chapter of Luke, Jesus tells a story about a shepherd’s willingness to put 99 sheep at risk while he goes out to find the one sheep who is lost.

And in between all those stories is the passage we read this morning. Today’s text talks about ‘counting the cost’. Which of you, Jesus asked his listeners, wouldn’t sit down and estimate the cost of building before starting a project? What king wouldn’t calculate his military power against an enemy before deciding to put up a defense against an attack?

This text is usually interpreted to mean that Jesus was telling us to count up the costs of discipleship, stop and make sure we know what we’re getting into before making a decision to follow him. But you know, that reading is inconsistent with the message of all the stories that surround it. That dinner host didn’t worry in advance about the mud those strangers would track in onto his carpeting. The shepherd did not do a cost-benefit analysis on the value of one sheep against the remaining 99. That father of the prodigal son spent recklessly on a party he was not obligated to give. I think this text is saying the opposite of ‘count the cost’.

I think Jesus was offering a contrast. Saying that the God he knew never tallies up the costs before he comes looking for us with arms open, offering us unlimited amounts of healing, love, chances to start over. I think Jesus meant that when you start down the road walking in his footsteps, you don’t know what’s going to come up. You can’t measure how you’re going to be called on to help, or limit the ways you will be stretched beyond what you think you can do.

In the past couple of weeks I have watched you do this: give without holding back, offer yourselves without reservation, act in love even after you had already poured everything out. That’s what it means to have faith. That’s what it means to grow into the image of your God. And whatever this next week brings, you will find what you need again. And again and again and again.