

RCL Year B, Proper 11, Sunday, July 18, 2021

St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Barrington, Illinois

## **SERMON**

Readings:

Old Testament, Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalm, Psalm 23

New Testament Epistle, Ephesians 2:11-22

Gospel, Mark 6:30-34,53-56

Being a good shepherd means experiencing the woes of sheep. Walking about seeking suitable plants to eat. Or water to drink. Struggling to birth a lamb. Facing a ravenous wolf. Dealing with other sheep and their curious ways. To be a good shepherd is to be compassionate with one's sheep.

The word Compassion derives from Latin so that a transliteration means "suffering with." Compassion, therefore, is somewhat different from empathy or sympathy. If empathy and sympathy express something about mindful alliance with another, compassion expresses something located in the heart and guts.

In today's Gospel lesson from the sixth chapter of Mark, Jesus comes to the shore of the Sea of Galilee, encounters a gathered crowd, and "had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd."

I wonder, do you recall the earliest instance of compassion you encountered?

For myself, what comes to memory is how my younger brother befriended Joey Quinn. It was soon after we moved into a new neighborhood when I was ten years old, so my brother would have been five or six. The Quinn family lived around the corner. I recall there were three girls, two older than me and one my age. Then, as I recall, a boy, Joey, brought up the tail end. We all attended the same church and parish school. There were quite a few kids in the neighborhood and we played with several and formed childhood friendships, often around games involving some kind of ball to be thrown and caught.

One terrible day, we learned that Joey was in hospital with severe burns after reaching for something near the kitchen stove and his sleeve caught fire, then quickly the rest of his shirt and pants. I heard for the first time about degrees of burns. Joey's were rated third and second degree. Joey would survive, but face multiple painful skin graft surgeries over the next several years.

Meanwhile, my brother Dan visited Joey when he came home from hospital and resumed playing with Joey, first indoors because it was painful for Joey to be in the sun. So, Dan apparently happily played board games and card games and just hung out with Joey indoors.

The other boys shunned Joey, I think because when he came outside Joey's raw and crinkled skin was off-putting. Dan liked Joey, so Dan hung with Joey, so Dan was shamed like Joey. Being shamed for hanging out with Joey and being Joey's friend did not seem to me to phase Dan. I think that Dan is probably the first person I thought of as a hero.

One of the key themes of Mark's Gospel is his depiction of Jesus as the Suffering Servant-Messiah, hearkening back to the prophet Isaiah. Mark Strauss in *Four Portraits, One Jesus*, writes:

“Though Jesus is the mighty Son of God and Messiah, his role is not to conquer but to suffer and die as the Servant of the Lord[.] The Gospel does not reject the traditional designations of Jesus as the Son of David and Messiah but rather redefines them. Jesus is the mighty Messiah who fulfills the role of the humble servant of Isaiah 53, the one who dies as a ransom for many.”

Strauss continues that another major theme of Mark's Gospel is discipleship following Jesus's example. He writes that true disciples are mindful of God's values, not human values.

Today's Mark passage is actually two passages. Today we encounter Mark's editorial use of framing as a means of comparing and contrasting depictions of Jesus, of God's Kingdom, and of the world and the world's champions. The first part of today's lesson follows immediately after the account of Herod's murder of John the Baptist. That passage, follows Jesus sending the disciples out into Galilee to begin practicing the Way of Love. The disciples successfully heal and reconcile, and they are dependent upon the resources of those they meet, thus encouraging compassionate hospitality. Now today the ecstatic disciples have returned from their ventures. Jesus calls them to self-care, to boat across the sea for rest and spiritual refreshment.

However, their time of rest and refreshment is limited to the boat journey to the deserted place (think wilderness metaphorically), where a crowd is gathered and in need of a good shepherd.

What follows is the feeding of 5000 families – although we don't hear that part today. Think of how the first journey passage links for comparison's sake the Herodian banquet featuring the decapitated John the Baptist with the generous feeding of 5000 from a few loaves and fishes with twelve baskets left to share further.

Then the disciples reboard the boat, intending to travel to Bethsaida, the home of Peter and Andrew, in the northeast quadrant of the Sea of Galilee. In an intervening passage we don't hear today, they are blown off course when a storm engulfs the disciples until Jesus walks over the water to meet them and continue the journey. Instead of arriving at Bethsaida, we hear today that they arrive in the bountiful and beautiful area of Gennesaret in the NORTHWEST quadrant of the sea. Here Jesus and the disciples meet still more people in need of Jesus's grace-filled ministry of healing, perhaps impliedly with the disciples also practicing their new-found healing abilities alongside Jesus. The echo of healing from touching even the fringe of his cloak refers back to chapter five and the healing of the woman suffering twelve years' of menstrual bleeding. Thus chapter six ends.

One of my favorite contemporary theologians is Samuel Wells, a priest of the Church of England posted formerly with Duke University and more recently vicar of St. Martin in the Fields in London. I particularly like Wells' book, *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being With God*. Can you hear the pun played in the subtitle? On one hand, it refers to how following the Way of Christ, what Wells calls the Nazareth Manifesto, illumines a path for how we may BE WITH God. On the other hand, the subtitle refers to how God's character is to BE WITH us, the "BEING WITH" God. Wells argues – for me persuasively -- that the little word "with" w-i-t-h may be the most important word in the entire Bible. After all, one of the names we use to describe the incarnation is Emmanuel, God with us. The

flip side of the coin is that “being with” – compassion – is a key marker of disciples of Christ Jesus.

About Jesus in the image of the Suffering Servant, Wells writes:

“[T]here is no gospel to which Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection are the precursor: Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection ARE the gospel.” (p. 60)

He continues:

“Christ truly enters the human condition and takes on suffering that, though it is nobody’s fault [often], nonetheless [suffering] impoverishes and depresses and subdues and disables. . . . This is how Christ shows God’s love for us – that in the face of both the folly of humankind and the contingency of existence, we see God not just setting things right but being with us and suffering with us as long as things hurt and until things come right – and even if things never come right.” (p. 291-92)

In this year of 2021, as the pandemic recedes, a friend recently commented to me that she thinks more drivers are driving more recklessly, more selfishly, than she has ever experienced. So many things call us to the barricade of US and THEM.

Are you an Apple person or a Windows person?

An introvert or extravert?

Prefer: Ocean or forest?

Dogs or cats?

Books or films?

Pick-up truck or minivan?

Individual liberty or freedom for the benefit of the common good?

I wonder that, in contrast with binaries, the natural world of God's Creation reveals infinitely diverse gradations of species, hues, and states of being? I wonder that God's compassionate love embraces both AND and OR, OFF and ON, US and THEM, YOU and I.

In human terms, What would it mean to be, not either US *or* THEM, but to be both US *and* THEM? Or, what would it mean that US and THEM reflect one another? Or, what might it mean if we are each reflected in the image of our ally as well as in the image of our enemy?

Brother Curtis Almquist of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist wrote in a recent reflection that "What we see in other people – particularly in people who affront us – is ourselves. They wouldn't get to us the way they do if they didn't already have a place in us. They are the mirror. Either that, or we are being visited by someone we will become. Rather than looking upon them with distance or disdain, treat them with kindness because they are kin to us."

This is what it means to believe and to practice *Imago Dei*, that we are made by God in the image of God. God delights in diversity. This is why Paul wrote again and again that in Christ the divisions between male and female, between Jew and gentile, between master and slave, have been transformed. As Paul writes in today's lesson from the letter to the community of Ephesus, "you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup>built upon the foundation of

the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”

I am one of two brothers, sons of my father, and so an object of the ancient story that begins, There was a man with two sons. My sibling brother and I have lived a long while since we lived in the neighborhood around the corner from Joey Quinn and his family. There is much to be reconciled between my brother and me, I admit. It helps me, though, to remember that my brother Dan set an example for compassionate hero-ism so long ago.

I am reminded that in another passage from *A Nazareth Manifesto*, Samuel Wells writes that : “The work of reconciliation is not about offering techniques and best practice and facilitation and listening skills and procedures to take people out of the wilderness and exile and bringing them to the Promised Land and the rebuilt Jerusalem. . . . The work of reconciliation is about recognizing that when God and humanity came face to face, the cross was the result, and about believing that, just as God brought glory out of the cross, God will bring transfiguration when energies that are arrayed against one another are gradually, often painfully, and always wondrously realigned [compassionately] to create dynamism and new life.”

Realigning compassionately to create dynamism and new life. Let’s follow that Way of Love, I say.

Deacon Timothy Murray+