



WHERE WESTMINSTER
GATHERS FOR WORSHIP

Consider the Source

A Sermon on Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

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Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
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The disciples are tired. They've been preaching repentance and casting out demons and healing sick bodies, which is what Jesus sent them to do. Now they've returned to tell him all that happened since he sent them out, two-by-two, carrying nothing but a staff, depending only on God for guidance.

As the disciples describe the recent events in their lives, their teacher hears the fatigue in their voices, sees their eyelids close, watches their faces as they stifle yawns. And all around this little assembly, crowds of people buzz in and out, like bees in and out of a hive. So Jesus suggests that they go to a private location to get some much-needed rest and a bite to eat. With all the interruptions, they haven't even had time for a turkey sandwich and a bag of chips. The disciples gladly heed Jesus' advice and head out by boat to a deserted area; but even before they arrive, the crowds have set up camp, beating them to the draw.

Jesus could have told the crowds to get lost for awhile, or at least, to lay low. That's not what happened. Instead, Jesus was moved by compassion because he saw that the crowds were like sheep without a shepherd, so he began to teach them many things.

In the church I served in Knoxville, a Sunday School teacher shared with me a wonderful story about a three-year old boy in her class. One Sunday during Advent, she was telling the children about the angels appearing to the shepherds and about the shepherds leaving their sheep to find the baby Jesus. Jonathan was listening intently to the story. He could hardly wait for the story to end so he could ask the teacher a question. "What happened to the sheep those shepherds left out there by themselves in the dark?" Good question, Jonathan. What does happen to sheep without a shepherd?

The allegory of our relationship to God in Christ as sheep with shepherd is a beautiful and inspiring one. With my little friend Jonathan, I ask the question “What happens to sheep without a shepherd?” I confess that I feel a little irritated with the crowd in today’s reading from Mark. The disciples have worked hard, and they are tired. Jesus is tired. Surely to goodness, they can be left alone for awhile to get some well-deserved rest. Surely the individuals in the crowd can manage for awhile longer without attention from Jesus. Adults should be resourceful, shouldn’t they? It seems that these people would be embarrassed about being so needy and dependent. Why didn’t Jesus simply consider the source and tell the crowd to figure things out for themselves? Instead, Jesus is moved with compassion for the crowd. Compassion literally means “to suffer with.” And in scripture, the words translated as “had compassion” have deep, rich significance. In Hebrew, the word usually translated as “compassion” is the plural of a noun which means “womb.” To be compassionate is to be “womb-like.”¹ “In the New Testament to feel compassion literally means what we would call a gut-wrenching experience. The ministry of Jesus was altogether a ministry of compassion.”²

Jesus might have said to his disciples, “Ignore these needy folks. Consider the source.” Instead, he felt the pain of those he saw. Considering the true Source of all that is life-giving, and relying totally on that Source, he taught the crowds. His words were manna from heaven for those who hungered for good news. Jesus both taught and lived the truth that the One who sent him into the world is a compassionate God who gave birth to creation, and loves and suffers with those who suffer, even as a mother loves and feels for her children.

My little friend Jonathan, as a three-year old child, understood the implications of sheep without a shepherd better than many adults would. Perhaps that’s why Jesus told us to be like children in our understanding — open to the truth that without God leading, protecting, teaching and healing us, we are defenseless, misguided and lost.

Whenever the word “compassion” is used in scripture to describe a deep feeling, it is followed by action. In today’s story, Jesus acts first with compassion for his disciples, inviting them to rest. The Lord knew his friends’ physical and emotional limitations, and in his compassion for them, he invites them to a deserted place for much needed time away.

We can take comfort in that compassionate act of Christ. For church people, tired of hard work and of seeing the check list of their responsibilities growing by the minute, Jesus’ invitation to the disciples to get away for awhile is like a soothing balm for our souls.

I hope that this summer you have had a break. I hope that you have had some time away from regular routines and heavy responsibilities. You are a loving, caring congregation, and you have reached beyond yourselves time after time. Sometimes to the point of exhaustion. I appreciate so much the way KC Ptomey described the spiritual life as a breathing in and a breathing out — a life perfectly modeled by Jesus, who rested and prayed, drawing from the Source of life and health and well-being, so that he could breathe out with love and compassion to those whose needs were great.

¹ Marcus Borg, “Jesus and Compassion,” *The Living Pulpit*, January-March 1994, pp.42-43.

² Andrew Purvis, *The Search for Compassion* (Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville: 1989), p. 18.

Following Jesus' example of breathing in and breathing out. May we take time out for rest and prayer so that we then have the strength to offer God's healing love to others. In our human frailty, it's easy to over-extend ourselves in caring for others without acknowledging our own need, or on the flip side to neglect our calling as disciples to care for one another and those beyond these walls. Jesus had compassion both for the disciples in their need for rest and also for the crowds who followed him. He responded to their need, first by teaching them; then by feeding them; and just a little later, after crossing back over in the boat, by healing their diseases.

The crowd in our reading from Mark irritated me by their pushiness and their rush to get to Jesus and the disciples. Yet, I wonder if my sin, and perhaps the sin of many modern-day people of God, if we were to enter the story, is to assume that we have no need for what Jesus offered, that we are self-sufficient. "In his important book *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen reminds us that it is only when we look honestly at our own exhaustion, confusion and mortality that we can extend compassion to others. The person with all the answers for others, the one who conveys the image of having her act together, Nouwen dismisses as ineffective and so distant from the human condition that she has nothing to offer anyone, beginning with herself. But acknowledging our brokenness, acknowledging our pain, admitting to our fatigue and our sadness, our disappointment, our hunger for meaning, opens us to the compassion, the love, the forgiveness, the healing of the Good Shepherd who calls us by name and extends love to us, often through the love of others. Only then, in our weakness, do we become equipped, as did the unlikely first twelve disciples, to pastor to others, to heal, to love in ways that surpass anything we would have imagined possible."³

Observing people in need was almost unavoidable in the Ancient Near East. The Roman Empire had a social service system of sorts, but institutions dedicated to the care of those with significant and debilitating needs did not exist. The poor, the elderly, the lame, the blind, the orphans, the deformed, the mentally ill were out in the streets begging, or if they were fortunate, were cared for in private homes. In that era of only primitive remedies for illness or injury, those disfigured by war, work, or disease were permanently dependent on others. Therefore, the haves and the have-nots were far more likely to have had daily contact with one another than is true for us here in the United States today.

In our North American context, our contact with those who suffer most profoundly is often hidden from our view. They suffer in institutional settings or in public housing developments or under bridges and overpasses, and we see them only if we take the time and make the effort. Despite our ability to extend care to the suffering and those who are oppressed, and our superior knowledge of the causes and remedies for illness and injuries, we often are less in touch on a day-to-day basis with desperate human need. [And] what we see on television of suffering and deprivation in other parts of the world is so far removed from us, we haven't a clue how to respond. We may be moved to tears, but rarely to action, often because we simply do not know what we can do.⁴

³ Doris Donnelly, "Soul-Sized Healing," *The Living Pulpit*, April-June 1997, p. 5.

⁴ Dennis MacDonald, "Gutsy Love," *Soujourners Magazine*, May-June 1973.

Today's story of Jesus' compassion and his acts of teaching and feeding and healing is a story of hope and healing for us all. When Jesus sees the crowd of people as sheep with a shepherd, he begins to teach them; and the teaching that Jesus offered those who came to him is a living Word that bridges the centuries and continues to touch human beings at the deepest level. The message from Jesus was a message of life and salvation.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall has spent his career exploring and writing about contemporary Christianity in North America. In his book *Why Christian?: For Those on the Edge of Faith*, Hall reminds his readers that the word salvation comes from the Latin word "salus," meaning "health" or "well-being." It means to be whole, to be integrated.⁵ Hall suggests that the primary underlying darkness of North America in this age is the belief that life is without meaning and that our lives are without purpose. Which leads to the compulsion to try to fill the void in our lives with things that will never actually fill it, to try to save our lives through quick fixes. What Jesus offers instead, Hall suggests, is not immunity from despair, any more than it is immunity from any other form of human doubt. What he offers is his companionship in the dark night. He has been there. He knows the way. He knows that the darkness is not all there is, and that even at its blackest, the darkness itself holds purpose. For without it, we cannot distinguish the light.⁶

Into the midst of the deepest human need, Jesus came to bring healing, wholeness, salvation for each of us and the whole Creation by showing us who God is. He came as pure, boundless love, and showed us that every day and through every dark night of our human existence, we can rest in the assurance that the God of love cares for the whole Creation.

At the same time, Jesus calls us, as he called those earliest disciples, to share in God's works of love and compassion, mercy and salvation. Two gifts make that possible: the gift of God's Spirit, which comforts, guides, strengthens and instructs us in what we do, and second, the gift of community, the body of Christ in the world — Christ's living presence. Together, as Christ's body, we offer love and aid and comfort to one another, loving as we have been loved, and giving that love away to the world.

We are each individually called to follow our Lord, but we should never mistake cultural messages, which tell us to be strong and independent, with what Jesus tells us, which is that we must lose our lives to find them, and that we belong to one another. We follow Christ together.

As Christ's Church, may we consistently consider the Source of our life and health and salvation and well-being, relying on that Source for the well-being of God's world. May we together, with God's help, seek out the poor, the weak, the desperate, the forgotten, partnering with them, offering our lives. And strengthened by God's presence, may we work to find just and humane solutions to human need — whether it be working toward fair housing policies, or better public education for all God's children, or medical coverage for those who have none, or fair and just economic policies that address some of the systemic causes of poverty, or

⁵ Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian? For Those on the Edge of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1998, pp. 57-58.

⁶ Ibid.

attention to the root causes of this terrible gun violence that has rocked our lives way too often in the last month. As we weep with others in the aftermath of the atrocity of last week's shooting in Chattanooga, we hardly know how to respond. Let us turn to our loving God, praying for the loved ones of the victims, and for those of our Muslim brothers and sisters who stand for goodness and who are equally dismayed by this horrific act of violence. Let us pray for wisdom, courage, and solutions to this terrible, terrible blight. May each one of us be the face of Christ to those we meet each day, and together, may we be Christ's body.

In 1932, Dietrich Bonhoeffer challenged his congregation in Germany to permit themselves to be confronted with the revolutionary words of Jesus in the gospels, declaring that Christians should take a stronger stand in favor of the weak, rather than considering the possible moral right of the strong.⁷ May that be so for us today as well. What happens to sheep without a shepherd? They are hungry and thirsty, lost and afraid. The compassionate Lord of us all came to be our shepherd, to lead us, to live among us, and to tell us that we have nothing to fear. God is indeed with us, Emmanuel. May we consider our Source, and draw from that endless supply of love and healing. Strengthened by the Source of infinite goodness, may we offer God's healing love to a world desperate for good news, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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⁷ As quoted by Geoffrey B. Kelly in "Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Justice for the Poor," in *Weavings*, Vol XVII, NO. 6, (Nashville: Upper Room Publications, 2002), p. 34.