

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11) July 19, 2009
Church of the Transfiguration, New York, NY
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Readings: Isaiah 57:14b-21; Psalm 22:22-30; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-44

He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

In today's gospel, the story continues to focus on the early ministry of Jesus. As a strategy to expand his ministry and contact with the people, Jesus had sent his disciples out to places that he himself would later visit.

He'd sent them out, two by two, into towns and villages throughout Galilee to share the message of Jesus that the kingdom of God was at hand. They preached love and acceptance, and demonstrated it by being with the people in their needs and joys, just as Jesus was doing. The disciples were even given a bit of the power Jesus had to heal, so they could anoint and heal the sick, comfort the afflicted and give a word of liberation to those enslaved by life's demons.

Today's reading starts with their return and their report to Jesus. In the other gospels, this story is told with a sense of how ecstatic the disciples were. They were amazed and overjoyed by the impact of their mission and the difference they had made. But also, there is a growing sense that the task ahead was more than they might be up to. Mark notes the large crowds, the fact that so many were coming to them that they had no leisure even to eat.

And so Jesus, as he often did, asked the disciples to come with him to a quiet place to find some time of recovery. Jesus looked for a retreat time, so they he and they would have the energy, the physical and spiritual capacity, to continue their mission among the people. Jesus knew that he could not carry on with his mission without taking time for prayer, renewal, rest and being in quiet with his circle of the disciples.

Retreats are very important to our spiritual health. Many parishes expect that their priest take an annual retreat, and distinguish it from vacation time. But, in fact, every Christian needs times of spiritual retreat when the day-to-day responsibilities can be set aside and the time dedicated to prayer, reflection and solitude. I have had that type of retreat at Holy Cross Monastery (www.holycrossmonastery.com) an Episcopal Benedictine Order in the Hudson River Valley near Poughkeepsie. Even closer, the House of the Redeemer on East 95th Street (www.houseoftheredeemer.org) offers many opportunities for spiritual retreat and renewal. These two wonderful places for retreat should be better known among the people of our parishes.

But a retreat is not a way to back off. A spiritual retreat nourishes us in order to empower us for even deeper compassion.

Following his time of renewal, Jesus' eyes were even more open to the people and their needs. When Jesus and the disciples again are with the people, Mark notes that he saw a great crowd.

He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

The people were lost, needy, seeking help and support. Jesus began to teach them many things. We can picture Jesus and the disciples moving among them, sharing the good news of God's kingdom, encouraging them, empowering them, and healing their brokenness of body and spirit.

Such great needs are evident in our day, too. For one, they exist within our families and even within ourselves, as we recognize the burdens we bare and the troubles we know of in our life experience. We live as well in a wider world of staggering need that can be overwhelming. We see it on the streets of New York, we hear it on national and international broadcasts, we read about it in newspapers and online. Starving people. Refugees, wounded and frightened, barely living in places too horrible to imagine. Children crying for parents, soldiers killed or maimed. We see it in the gulf between the world's poor and the wealth of our own society and lives. Global communication has made us more aware of more need in more places than we could ever have previously known about.

Easily we can become overwhelmed, frightened and seek to distance ourselves from such enormous needs. We can become immune. Have a dose of compassion fatigue. Turn inward.

But the question for us is: How can we, as follower's of Jesus, remain open to the needs and sufferings of those around us and not become numbed into a lack of concern?

My friend, fellow priest and retired Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in Syracuse, Dick Bower, upon whom this sermon's ideas are heavily dependent, once suggested that the principles and experience of those in Alcoholics Anonymous are a good place to look for ways to be compassionate, to be in solidarity with those in need, to learning how to hang in there for the long haul rather than falling into a distant detachment from the needs of others.

Those participating in AA know that, ultimately, we are powerless. We cannot fix anything ourselves. "Solo" self-help is not an option. AA is based on the power of community and the confidence that true help comes from outside ourselves. Faced with this truth, we are left to throw ourselves on the mercy of a loving, compassionate God. Admitting powerlessness is hard, but essential in finding and receiving the grace of God.

At the heart of it all the life of a recovering alcoholic and the life of a Christian who seeks to have a compassionate heart, at the heart of a community like our Church of the Transfiguration that seeks to stand with those who are like a sheep without a shepherd – just think of our ministry at Madison Square Park - at the heart of it all is the conviction that God’s grace is sufficient, no matter what.

The feeding of the five thousand in today’s gospel is a proclamation of the munificence and overflowing grace of God. It is sign and symbol of the reality of God’s love and presence in the deprivations of life.

I cannot fix all of the pain in my world or the wider world. I can only, finally, accompany my own anguish and the struggle of others. I can only finally companion another – who is ultimately Jesus in disguise – companion him or her in their pain and human need. If I can stretch beyond my own tendency to isolate, move beyond my small comfort zone, I will be touched by that pain – surely - but also by God’s healing as well.

Compassion and love are not sentimentality, not simply good will. Love and compassion within the Christian life is intentional, an “on purpose” solidarity with others in their need, identifying with the others, of bearing one another’s burden.

When Jesus returned from his retreat, from his time apart with the disciples, he saw the crowds and the enormity of their need. Looking upon them:

He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

It is still now important – this need to look, to be aware, to notice, to register the needs within us and around us. It may be overwhelming at times, but Jesus and his disciples entered the crowds, touched them and were touched in return. They gave of the little they had – five loaves and two fishes – and God turned it into generosity and sufficiency. It was a moment of grace, of healing and liberation. All because Jesus and his friends did not run and hide, but faced the enormity of it all confident in the grace of God.

May you and I be so bold and faithful to be disciples of Jesus that way in our day.
AMEN.