

Sheep Without a Shepherd
A Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 18, 2021
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The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed. Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

So often, it is only when our world has been rocked that we become aware of the fragility of life, and of what is truly meaningful in life. Only then do we become aware of God's presence, the unseen shepherd who has finally gotten our attention. It's as if Jesus says, "Look! This is important, this is where I am calling you to focus, to care, to have compassion."

Last week we heard the tragic and gruesome story of the beheading of John the Baptist. Surely this event rocked the world of both Jesus and the disciples, indeed, it even grabbed the attention of those on the sidelines who were observing this emerging movement announcing the kingdom of God. Following Jesus suddenly became risky and more challenging. The needs of the people were overwhelming and the crowds were enormous.

What has rocked your world lately? How has God caught your attention? The most glaring example is probably the pandemic and its implications for our daily life. Perhaps it's political polarization or violence in our streets. The wildfires and water shortages. The increase of intense storm systems and heatwaves. Maybe it's the collapse of a condominium, reminding us of the crumbling infrastructure across our nation. Closer to home, we have lost the physical presence of three of our beloved parishioners who have entered life eternal. Some of us have lost jobs, family members have died or moved away, or a medical diagnosis has changed all our plans.

Often, our first reaction is to keep ourselves busy so that we don't have to think about whatever is going on in our lives. Loss and grief, pain and suffering, are not comfortable and so we avoid them. Today Jesus invites us into these feelings, into a space where we can be still and rest, into a space where we can both receive compassion and offer it to others.

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When our world is rocked, when we are so busy that we have no time to rest, or when we avoid rest because we fear what might bubble up in our minds to convict us, Jesus calls us to notice that he is present with us, reminds us that we have a shepherd, and that he has many things to teach us to help us through our suffering.

Notice that there are verses missing in our Gospel this morning. In the missing verses, 35-54, Jesus feeds the 5,000, sends the disciples back across the sea, then walks on water to join them in the boat, calming the stormy sea. When they reach land the crowds press in on them again.

Perhaps this helps us see that life is a series of both beautiful and hard things, and that Jesus the shepherd is with us in every moment, and has compassion for us.

The Greek word used in this text for compassion is *splagnizomai* and it means to be moved in the inward most parts; deeply moved in your gut, or in your heart. not only in your brain. And our English word compassion means to suffer with. It is much more than observation or pity, it is more than saying, “Oh that is so sad. Oh that is a terrible thing.” To have compassion is to feel the pain and suffering along with another. It is not only talking about, but also doing something for others in their suffering. In the past few weeks, I have witnessed beautiful compassion here as we have fed two grieving families. We have also fed the hungry at the Hope Center. We have been deeply moved and taught by the shepherd to suffer with, to embody Christ, as we minister to others.

As a faith community we have worked hard and with compassion to stay connected to and care for one another during the pandemic. We have endured losses and challenges and perhaps learned some things about ourselves and about our life together as a parish. Some of us are ready to return to normal and would like for everything to be just as it was before the pandemic. Some of us have discovered that we liked some of the changes that resulted from the pandemic, and we are not so sure about returning to all of the former ways. In our personal lives we have learned through our struggles what is most important for our lives. How will we move forward to best meet the needs of everyone, those who are already a part of the parish, as well as those in the larger community? And how will we do this with compassion?

The crowds recognized Jesus because they had witnessed his feeding and healing. Do the people of Petersburg recognize us as feeders and healers? Do they also see us as a place where they may come to hear Jesus’ teaching, to find compassion, and to rest?

The shepherd will teach us many things if we will rest awhile and listen. That might mean that we find new ways to offer food, healing, compassion and rest; new ways to worship, study scripture, and to serve. Sometimes that might mean that we let go of some of the old ways of doing things. Jesus gives us permission to take care of ourselves. In our church community this may mean we will have fewer volunteers available, so we will need to find ways to be the church more efficiently, using the resources we have available. It might mean we do less so that we can be more fully present to one another.

The needs of the world are great — we are like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus has compassion for us all. He acknowledged the disciples’ need for a break, while also acknowledging the people’s need for healing and teaching. Like the disciples we need to find the balance between compassion and rest.

None of us is Jesus. All of us need to be fed. Sometimes we are in need of compassion and sometimes we are called to offer it to others. Being honest about our needs and being gentle and compassionate with one another during the changes and chances of this life will bring healing. It will bring about the Kingdom of God. Amen.