

The Second Sunday after Pentecost  
June 14, 2020  
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Exodus 9:2-8a  
Psalm 100  
Romans 5:1-8  
Matthew 9:35—10:23

*Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.*

There's a lot wrong in the world. That's hardly news. And it's hardly new.

There was a lot wrong in the world in Jesus' day as well. Our gospel this morning opens with a recap of sorts. Jesus has been going about to "all the cities and villages," teaching and preaching and healing.

As I pondered this morning's gospel, the one word that popped out from that first verses was "all." Jesus went about to ALL the cities and villages, not content merely to pay attention to what was happening in his immediate neighborhood.

And what he saw out there, as he looked around, broke his heart:

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*

That's a key verse for all that follows, so it's worth unpacking it a bit.

Matthew tells us Jesus had "compassion" for the people he saw in all those cities and villages, but the Greek word for compassion – something like "splanchnizomai" – relates to intestines. <sup>i</sup> It'd be better to say that when Jesus looked around at people in all those cities and village, it hit him in the gut. What Jesus saw was gut-wrenching.

The people he saw were, according to our translation, "helpless and harassed." But again, that's too soft. Better to say, they were mistreated and beaten down.

So maybe better to imagine the situation, and Jesus' reaction to it, this way:

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he felt it in his gut for them, because they were skinned alive and thrown down, like sheep without a shepherd.* <sup>ii</sup>

Jesus feels more than a gentle concern for people who feel lost. He feels a deep passion for people who deserve to be taken care of but are instead mistreated and taken advantage of.

It is such a far cry from how things are supposed to be. They are "like sheep without a shepherd."

And it's no small point to note that shepherds, in the biblical tradition, are almost always political figures, typically kings. King David himself was a shepherd before anointed as king. The prophets, in later generations, railed against the ruling class, so-called "shepherds," who failed to provide for (and protect) the people entrusted into their care, who instead "fleeced" them for personal gain (e.g., Ezekiel 34:1-6). And when Jesus speaks of himself as the "good shepherd" (John 10), it was in stark contrast to – and a sharp rebuke of – religious leaders who neglected and abused those they should have provided for and protected (cf., John 9).

Matthew says all this in a relatively few words: the people are hurting and it hits Jesus in the gut; it breaks his heart, so he proclaims – in word and deed – the kingdom come near. And here, too, it's political. When Jesus speaks of God's kingdom, he is announcing nothing less than God's intention to turn our upside-down world right-side-up.

There's a lot wrong in the world – so much so that Jesus turns to his disciples and enlists them in his mission. First, Jesus tells them to pray for laborers to help in the work he himself has already begun doing. Then, Jesus tells them that they are the answer to their own prayers.

It's an astonishing twist. That's a point we might easily miss. After all, we've heard this story before. But Barbara Brown Taylor says this about this unexpected turn:

[The disciples] were given exactly the same things to do that Jesus himself had been given to do, but it did not have to be that way. He could have pointed out that none of them was the son of God, after all. None of them had been born under a blinding star, or had angels sing hosannas over their cribs, or received exotic gifts from foreign dignitaries before they so much as cut a tooth.

He could have reminded them of all that and insisted that they remain his assistants ... Instead, he transferred his ministry to them while he was still alive. He entrusted them. With no training and very little advice, he sent them out to heal wounds and restore outcasts and bring the dead to life. <sup>iii</sup>

And what makes all this all the more astonishing is what we know of these twelve.

Several years ago, someone came up with the kind of an analysis a consultant might have written up after interviewing these twelve and looking into their qualifications:

- Simon Peter is too emotional and given to fits of temper. His profile indicates that he may be unreliable in pressure situations.
- Andrew has absolutely no leadership qualities.
- The two brothers, James and John (the sons of Zebedee), place their own interests above company loyalty.
- Philip is very slow to learn and tends to ask foolish questions.
- Bartholomew is an introvert.

- Thomas demonstrates a questioning attitude that could undermine morale.
- We believe it is our duty to inform you that Matthew has been accused of using a public service position to extort others for personal gain.
- James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddeus have radical leanings.
- Simon, also known as the “Cananaean,” appears to have other interests which would absorb his attention and possibly weaken the core mission.
- One of your candidates, however, shows great potential. He is a man of great ability and resourcefulness. He meets people well, has a keen business mind and personal contacts in high places. He is motivated, responsible and ambitious. We highly recommend Judas Iscariot as your controller and right-hand man.

It’s all tongue-in-cheek, of course. And yet it’s hard not to conclude that Jesus seemed to go out of his way to choose people who were not qualified for the task at hand. He picked twelve ordinary people with no particular aptitude or aspirations for transforming the world. And yet these are the twelve Jesus sent out to do the very work he had been doing ... and they would (with the exception of Judas, of course) be the ones left to continue that work after he was gone.

Well, that was then. And this is now.

But in case you haven’t noticed, there’s still a lot wrong in the world. Especially if you widen your vision to look at all the cities and villages in our land, it’s inescapably clear to say that there’s a lot wrong in this world.

We’ve seen the news – the graphic cellphone video we cannot un-see – of George Floyd pinned to the ground for nearly nine minutes under another man’s knee, pleading, “I can’t breathe.” We’ve heard the accounts of Ahmaud Arbery, attacked and shot for jogging in a neighborhood where he was not wanted, and Breonna Taylor, shot and killed by police officers during a middle-of-the-night raid in her home. We’ve learned of the everyday acts of hostility and prejudice against birdwatchers and hikers who aren’t white, as if nature belongs exclusively to white people. It is all heart-breaking, gut-wrenching.

Does today’s gospel pertain?

*When Jesus sees the crowds, does he feel it in his gut for them, because they were skinned alive and thrown down, like sheep without a shepherd?*

And I’m wading into political waters here. But how can I not wade in? When those who should be concerned for the welfare and wellbeing of the most vulnerable in our midst neglect and accuse them instead, God’s people are like sheep without a shepherd. When prioritizing a return to the old normal, even as it becomes unmistakably clear that this world is upside-down and that Jesus came to turn our world right-side-up, something’s gone horribly wrong.

There's a lot wrong in our world – so much so that it should be clear that Jesus wouldn't be willing to wait around for somebody else to step in and fix everything. Ordinary people, like you and me, have work to do.

And there's no point waiting for the time when we'll be ready. That's part of the sense I make of Jesus' admonition about not taking gold or silver for our pockets. There will never be enough in the way of provisions to feel we're adequately supplied. So don't wait.

Oh, there will be some who will welcome us (and our efforts) and others who will reject and resist us. If we set out to engage in this hard work, we can expect hospitality and hostility. Go anyhow. Accept the gifts. Expect the rest.

And we should be clear-eyed. Those invested in keeping this world upside-down will not look kindly on any attempts to set things right.

I am challenged – and at the same time reassured – by these observations. Jesus' disciples, after all, were never given detailed instructions, no "how-to" manual. And neither are we. They weren't chosen because they were sure to get things right; they were chosen because they were ordinary folk (like you and me), and ordinary folk (like you and me) are the ones who need to start the change needed in our world.

If we are to begin to do any of the holy work of helping create a beloved community where all God's children breathe free, we will not do it right. We will make mistakes. We will state things badly. Begin anyhow.

There was an Episcopal News story this past week about two congregations, one a mostly white Episcopal Church and the other an historically black AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Members from these two churches began meeting to share book studies in the aftermath of the 2015 massacre at Mother Emanuel AME Church, in Charleston.

Following the killing of George Floyd and recent protests and unrest in Charleston, as in many other parts of the country, their conversations have taken on added urgency. They're not talking about books so much of late. They're talking about being white and being black in America. And at least one of those participating, Tonnia Switzer is clear that ordinary white folk like me – and like you, perhaps ... we all have a part to play.

This is part of how the story goes:

What can white people of faith do to help? Get the facts about what is going on in the country, Switzer said. She usually tries not to make waves on Facebook, but she has begun posting links for white friends about how to become an anti-racist.

"I need you to do the work," she said. "I need you to get up and speak."

Defensive reactions like “I’m not a racist” aren’t helpful, said Gail DeCosta, a black Episcopalian who serves on the vestry at Grace. “That’s just too easy to say. People have got to be made to be aware they’re doing racist things, whether they think they’re racist or not.”

Liz Alston, a member of Mother Emanuel, suggested that white neighbors who aren’t sure how best to support racial healing shouldn’t feel discouraged from the work. “Start slow, but do something,” she said. <sup>iv</sup>

This morning, our gospel describes how Jesus reacted to the people he saw in the cities and villages he came to:

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he felt it in his gut for them, because they were skinned alive and thrown down, like sheep without a shepherd.*

That may offer a hint as to how Jesus would see the cities and villages of 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

And it may offer a hint, too, about what needs to happen next. There is so much wrong in our world that we cannot wait for God to step in and fix things, nor can we defer to those with the right skillset or authority to set things right. No, it is our calling to pray for laborers to do the work that needs doing. And then notice that we ourselves are the answer to our prayer.

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<sup>i</sup> Rob Myallis @ <http://lectionarygreek.blogspot.com/2020/06/matthew-935-108.html>.

<sup>ii</sup> Richard Swanson @ <https://provokingthegospel.wordpress.com/2020/06/08/a-provocation-second-sunday-after-pentecost-june-14-2020-matthew-935-1023/>.

<sup>iii</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Heaven at Hand,” in *Bread of Angels* (Cowley Publications, Cambridge/Boston, 1997), p. 153.

<sup>iv</sup> David Paulsen @ <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2020/06/10/5-years-after-charleston-massacre-george-floyd-killing-resounds-in-churches-multiracial-book-study/>.