

## **Eighth Sunday after Pentecost July 18 2021**

### **Jeremiah 23:1-6; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**

Compassion is a wonderful word to say in the Greek- *splagidzomai*- to have your guts move. It is literally a visceral word.

We are given occasion to use it in our reading today when Jesus calls the disciples, newly arrived from their paired evangelism, to come away for some R and R. But the people see and recognize them and hurry to get to where they are going.

They crave the healing, teaching, acceptance and welcome to all that Jesus and his disciples have been showing them. With John the Baptist unjustly killed by the authorities, they are without direction. Now, Jesus and the disciples come ashore expecting to rest from their labors, and find this large crowd waiting for them.

Jesus, exhausted, could have turned them away, focused on his and his disciples needs. Instead, Jesus has *splagidzomai* - compassion on them. Their need, their desire for healing, learning, acceptance, love is so great it hits him in his guts pulls him outward into relationship with them. They are like sheep without a shepherd, wandering aimlessly and alone, and so Jesus does what his guts tell him to- teach, heal, feed, love. Things they are not finding elsewhere.

The prophet Jeremiah was the son of a priest, called by God to prophesy in the southern kingdom of Judah. His link to the priesthood was ironic, because he spent most of his time in conflict with the priestly and the ruling class.

Jeremiah, in the vision that called him, was told by God that his proclamations would “uproot and tear down” but also “plant and build up”. Jeremiah warns the people of God that their leaders (religious and political) have led them astray.

This takes several forms- They are worshipping other gods. Jeremiah talks about this in terms of adultery. They are cheating on God with other gods, even while proclaiming their fidelity. Also, their leaders have abandoned the Torah which leads to social injustice towards the most vulnerable in their lands, widows, orphans, the immigrant. These are left to fend for themselves rather than be attended to by the community.

In the passage from today, God speaks through Jeremiah using the metaphor of a shepherd to describe the bad kings who have scattered the “flock” of Israel through their behavior. While there are consequences for these actions, God promises to step in where these bad shepherds have failed, to gather the flock and to raise up a new king from David’s line to save Israel and Judah. Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise.

Jesus is the king who looks on the sheep of his flock and is moved with compassion. To care for them- all of them- rich, poor, citizen, immigrant, saint and sinner. All will be welcome under the care of the one whom God sends.

The texts today raise an interesting question, what are the leaders we follow- political, religious, media- moved by? Are the leaders we follow moved by compassion for us and others? Or is it something else?

Compassion and community are two characteristics of Jesus and his ministry. Compassion is a visceral/emotional connection with others and their lives. In English it literally means to suffer with or to suffer together. It pulls the one who feels it into community with the one who suffers.

Compassion is entering into that suffering and then working to alleviate it. Compassion is kin to love- and Jesus calls on us to love our enemies, to extend

that sense of community even to them. To pull their humanity – if not their beliefs or actions- into the realm of our concern.

Does this describe the leaders that we follow? Do they encourage and show this kind of attentiveness to the care and concern of others? Is this what we do? Do we have compassion for others?

The voice of Jeremiah is a good one to hear and attend to. Because it is so easy to get caught up in the echo chamber of our own rightness. To explain away those things that might otherwise make us uneasy about our position, our leaders, our actions. 1 John 1:8 reminds us that about our own sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. It is a psychologically difficult thing to do, admit that we have done something wrong. That we have gone down the wrong path.

But when we turn back to the path which Jesus lays out for us and call us to, this is where we find life fuller and more abundant. Unfortunately, compassion is not associated with church in many people’s minds these days, especially in younger adults.

One has to ask the question, what happened? Compassion- a pull to attend to the suffering of others- is the primary characteristic of God in the Hebrew Bible. It is the defining characteristic of Jesus- our Lord. And, as Rodney Stark writes in his 2011 book, *The Triumph of Christianity*, “in the pagan world, and especially among philosophers, mercy was regarded as a character defect and pity as a pathological emotion; because mercy involves providing unearned help or relief, it is contrary to justice. ... This was the moral climate in which Christianity taught that mercy is one of the primary virtues—that a merciful God requires humans to be merciful ... the truly revolutionary principle was that Christian love and charity

must extend beyond the boundaries of family and even those of faith, to all in need” Part of the attraction of the early church was because “in the midst of the squalor, misery, illness, and anonymity of ancient cities, Christianity provided an island of mercy and security”. The early church lived out the reality of the reign of God in contradiction to the culture of the time, and people came to it. Because in this reign they saw life. Life fuller and more abundant than life would otherwise be.

And that reality does not just live in the past. The Rev. Dr. Delmer Chilton wrote in a 2018 article for the *Living Lutheran* magazine about a congregation barely getting by. Their church building was tiny, just the worship space and two little rooms behind the altar. When they had a congregational dinner, they pushed the pews up against the wall and made a table down the center aisle with sawhorses and plywood. The lay pastor was a teacher from a town 50 miles away. She drove out on Sunday mornings for service, ate a bag lunch in her car, visited the sick, and then headed home by late afternoon. This went on for many years.

There was a man in the congregation who grew worried about the health of the church’s nearest neighbors. Most of the members no longer lived close by. They had grown up there but had moved because of jobs, or marriage or just because. Many of the folk who lived near the church were elderly, or poor or both. The man talked to a nurse about his concern, and they came up with the idea of a once-a-month health clinic—simple stuff like blood pressure screening, etc. They were stunned by the size of the turnout. One of the things they realized was that many of the folk were food deprived and fell through the cracks of the state’s assistance program.

After church one Sunday, they had a council meeting, which meant they had a congregational meeting, because they were so small everybody was on the council. It didn't happen overnight, but they turned one of those backrooms into a kitchen and the other into a food pantry. They served several meals a week on that plywood table in the center aisle, and they gave away bags of food to anyone who asked. And they did it all without any sermons or testimonies or asking folk to come to church. And eventually, they looked around and realized there were more people in church on Sundays.

"Imagine that," they thought, "I wonder how that happened?" They wondered because they had done all that they had done with the purest of motives. They didn't think, "If we do nice stuff for the people in the neighborhood, maybe they'll start coming to church." No, they thought, "These people are in need, maybe we can help." That was pretty much it. Like Jesus, they "had compassion." That church never became a mega-church, or even a regular-size church, Dr. Chilton writes. It got a little bigger and did a few more things in response to the needs in the neighborhood. As one of the members said, "At my age, the most important things are loving others and feeling useful. That's all we're trying to do." And they had compassion. And it was enough.

What Jeremiah points out to the people of Judah, is that God is not concerned with big temples and well performed religious services, what God desires is that we would have compassion for one another. That we would feel connected to those in our midst who are suffering and work to alleviate that suffering. That we would love them in word and in deed, regardless of who they are.

And the promise of God come in the person of Jesus and in the witness of the early church and beyond is that will be enough. It's not about programs, it's not about buildings, it's not about what it means for us. Rather, it is about our neighbor, our enemy, the one who is suffering and the spagidzomai we show to them. That they might experience the transformation of life lived in the reign of God. That they might meet through us the good shepherd, Jesus – the promised one of God. And when we do and when they do, that- Jesus promises- that will be enough. Thanks be to God.