

The apostles in this reading have just returned from the villages that Jesus sent them out to. Jesus authorized them to embody and announce and the coming of a new realm—to enact the presence of God’s grace—and they must be flushed with success because they have “cast out many demons, and anointed many with oil who were sick and cured them.” They have gathered around Jesus to tell him all that they had done and taught.

Wouldn’t it have been an exciting scene? Can you just imagine the joy and the stories they had to share? And they would have been right to be excited! They have been initiated and transformed from simple followers to active carriers of the Gospel. This is the very first time that Mark refers to them as the apostles, which means “sent ones.”

“Come away to a deserted place,” Jesus invites them. “Come away to a deserted place by yourselves and rest awhile.” They have done well and have earned an opportunity to take a deep breath, have they not? So they all get on a boat and go off for a well-deserved retreat. But even before they can arrive at their harbor hideaway, the apostles’ reputation has attracted a crowd, many of whom are people from the towns the apostles have just visited.

Now, we heard God promise in our reading from Samuel that there would be a place for the people where they could be undisturbed and where they could get rest from all their enemies. That’s part of what church is meant to be: a place separate from the chaos of the world outside where people can find healing, restoration and renewal. Our liturgy, our hospitality, our teaching are intended to offer safe haven from life-destroying pain, fear and loneliness.

You must be spreading the news of the rest and healing that you have found here because, like the apostles, our reputation and our numbers are growing. You must be making people aware of the marvelous life happening at St. Elizabeth because people are coming to this sanctuary. In a few weeks, the community around us will see that we are repairing our roof and that scaffolding will be another signal that life in abundance is budding at this place. People will be streaming into St. Elizabeth when we host the end of the Burien Jazz walk in September, and whether they decide to come to church or not, they, too, will see that life is blossoming here.

God will plant seeds in the hearts of many of them and there will be more people among us because you are carrying God's love and healing out to a world in need. We are a growing community. In fact, while this may already be a place where we can rest from our enemies, some who have been deeply involved in the day-to-day life of the church may quietly be wondering when we are going to get any rest from our friends!

"You are no longer strangers and aliens," we heard from the letter to the Ephesians, "but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets." That is genuinely uplifting and grace-filled news, is it not? And yet every household needs dishes washed, gardens weeded and hardware replaced. The larger the household, the more there is to do. And the more we do, the more people we encounter who need healing of one kind or another.

And that's where even our best intentions can go off the rails if we are not attentive. The guidance in our Gospel reading is so subtle that we may miss it entirely.

The apostles came to Jesus to tell him about all that they had done and taught. They have learned to empty themselves, and Mark's Jesus takes them to a place where they can experience a taste of the next level of their spiritual maturity. The first part of our reading was about what the apostles did, but the entire second half of our reading is about the healing that Jesus poured out endlessly.

Two kinds of love are interacting in this story and right here in this place. Or perhaps a better way to say it is that love is showing up in two different but interconnected ways, a bit like breathing. The inhale happens here in this sanctuary. Here we experience and receive the love of God who loves *all*. God's love flows over us and into us spontaneously and without motivation. We belong to each other here and we belong to the Body of Christ made manifest here.

The exhale happens out beyond these beloved doors so in need of paint; the exhale happens out from under this wonderful leaky roof. The exhale happens when we provide experiences of God who loves *uniquely*. We learn here how to give love in this way, to seek God in others with a love motivated by the desire to make a difference in the world. You might be the only experience that someone has this week of a person acting as though their life

mattered. Now, which is more important—the inhale or the exhale? How long can you do one without the other?

It's true that the house is in need of repair and that there seems to be an endless stream of people in all kinds of need. But here's an essential point, the guiding point, in fact: Jesus had compassion for a great crowd that were like sheep without a shepherd. But, you see, we are not like that crowd. We have a shepherd. What the apostles learned in the first part of our reading was the joy of acting like that loving shepherd. The second part of our reading is a reminder to them and to us that we are not that shepherd.

Our shepherd is always present, never absent. When we tell ourselves, "If I don't do it, it won't get done," we can begin to take on God's creative role or to act as though God is unhearing, uncaring or not even present. Far more life-giving to ask ourselves, "What is my unique contribution?" for each of us surely has God-given gifts to offer.

Our shepherd is always loving, never abusive. When we tell ourselves, "Everyone else's needs take priority over mine," we can begin to take on God's self-emptying role or to act as though God is cruelly demanding, impossible to please and wants to drive us without mercy. Far more life-giving to recognize that we are utterly dependent on God who is the source of abundance and to ask ourselves, "What is the portion that I can truly give?"

In this sanctuary, we remind ourselves of right relationship with God. We listen to stories, sing songs and take in the presence of the Risen Christ, who renews us, comforts us, strengthens us and gives us peace. We open ourselves to allow God to make a difference in our lives, to transform us, and to inspire to live as God's people. We learn to trust God enough to release unrealistic responsibility for God's movement in other people's lives.

Our work includes maintaining the place God has given us, not to earn merit, but as an act of love so that there is a haven of rest here—a place for weary people to find God's peace and goodness. God's pure love knows no bounds, but even the apostles had to learn that they had limitations as *carriers* of that love, not the source. We come here to be refilled by the source of that boundless love.

Our work, like the apostles, is to tell people that God's love, healing and peace can be found here because before people can find God everywhere, they have to be able to find God somewhere. This sanctuary is where the

heartsick, the lonely and the broken can come to find the fullness of God in Christ, our shepherd—to touch and be healed. After all, God creates from the fullness of love, not from the emptiness of need. And it is the Risen Christ, the shepherd, who loves with the uncontainable, wildly extravagant abundance of God. You and I are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, but the chief cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself.

As we become more and more secure in our membership in the house of God, we are drawn into a joyful spiral of growth and intimacy moving deeper into the heart of God. Trusting that love frees us to set realistic limits, so that we act no longer out of obligation, but out of the love of God. And it is the love of God that transforms us, you and I, into the fringe on Christ's cloak for those seeking wholeness.