

“When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Jesus sees a once robust public discourse now degenerated to name-calling, finger-pointing and violence, both physical and verbal. Racial and religious intolerance and tension is on the rise. Slavery and human trafficking are a rampant and growing industry.

When Jesus sees all this, he has compassion. He is moved with love, sorrow and perhaps a little outrage. He suffers with the crowds he sees, but his reaction is not sweet concern for a field of fluffy lambs whose caretaker seems to be away.

You see, the boys who retranslated the Geneva Bible into something a bit less subversive for King James pulled a lot of teeth from our scripture in an understandable effort to keep the king from sending them on a one-way trip to the Tower. They gave us the flowery and flat “harassed and helpless.”

But the author of Matthew’s Gospel was a skilled Greek writer who chose words intentionally for this addition to a story borrowed from Mark. To heighten the plight of the people that Jesus is encountering, Matthew describes a much more upsetting scene.

Harassed and helpless? Hardly. In Matthew’s Greek, Jesus sees people who have been *flayed*. Mangled. Torn apart. They are not people simply being picked on or wandering aimlessly because they can’t find anyone to lead them. They are not people just being teased or intimidated because they are following their religion differently or pursuing life from a different perspective.

Jesus is seeing, teaching and healing people who feel skinned alive, jerked around and cast aside.

Those crowds Jesus refers to as “the harvest.” That harvest is still plentiful. Plenty of people all around us –some right here in this congregation – feel raw, silenced, unappreciated. There are, of course, those among us feeling strong, ready to listen with an open heart and to come alongside people in need. But still, by comparison, the workers are few.

And Christ sees this crowd. Whether we are feeling something like harassed or something closer to mangled, or whether we are, for the moment, feeling able to offer a hand or a shoulder, Christ still sees it all with compassion.

Now, we are in the year of Matthew, whose Gospel begins and ends with references to Jesus as “Emmanuel,” meaning “God with us.” But the specific readings for each Sunday in Pentecost depend on the date for Easter. And because that date changes from year to year, we haven’t heard this passage in a Sunday liturgy for nearly a decade. It’s more than serendipity that our lectionary has provided this passage.

The message just could not be more timely or pertinent. God *is* with us. All of us.

God in Christ is with us whether we are one of the bloodied sheep or one of the limited laborers. Matthew’s Jesus never judges, but teaches and inspires as the embodiment of God’s loving compassion for creation. And in this passage, Jesus imparts authority – permission, maybe is closer to the word Matthew chose. Jesus gave his disciples the freedom and the ability to crystalize God’s loving compassion into words and action.

Christ has imparted that same freedom and ability to you and to me. We have all felt unheard and jerked around like bloodied sheep, or we will at some point. At other times, we have all wondered if we were up to the challenge of serving those near us who were walking a difficult stretch of road.

And yet, God came to us in Jesus Christ to show us that God loves not the people we *aspire* to be, but the people that we really are. Right now. And what’s more, God breathes into us the authority – that is, the permission and capability of the Holy Spirit – to liberate and make whole like Jesus did, but in considerably more complex and emergent contexts.

If you have ever witnessed a situation that wrenched your heart and made you think: “That is not how it is supposed to be,” that’s a movement of the Spirit.

That’s the prophetic sigh.

More than 10,000 men, women and children in the greater Seattle area are homeless. “That is not how it is supposed to be.” Political polarization is increasingly hostile and hateful. “...not how it is supposed to

be.” Hate crimes, abuse and threats are rising. “...not how it’s supposed to be.”

Now, we may disagree about how to go about correcting some of these situations. But just pause there for a moment and recognize how pregnant that reality is. So much begins when our collective hearts sigh, “That is *not* how it is supposed to be.”

Let that moment grow and develop a little before we go rushing to solutions. Recognize the prophetic sigh as the Holy Spirit breathing right here in this sanctuary. The realm of heaven has come nearer than our own heartbeats in this house. And so, we start right here. Because when human participation in divine holiness dwindles, divisiveness and despair arise.

And Matthew's Gospel addresses the church more directly than any of the others. The story of the disciples is our story. Jesus tells all his followers to go about their lives – our lives – showing people with words and actions that the realm of heaven has come near.

Jesus did more than talk about heaven as some distant future. He demonstrated the nature of God’s realm breaking into the present by liberating people and helping them to find wholeness. Like the first disciples, this church – you and I – are tasked with carrying the message of the Gospel. And we have to go beyond what Jesus did into far more complicated situations.

That’s why we begin at home. We start with ourselves and with each other as though we are the lost sheep of Israel before we can even consider going out to all nations. You’ll note, please, that Jesus did not say: “Go out and scold people. Go out and make people believe what you believe.”

What Jesus did with his life was to show that when the realm of heaven is near, liberty and wholeness take seed. And the realm of heaven has taken root here. We will see heaven spreading beyond these walls by nurturing what has taken root here.

You may feel like a bloodied sheep. And it may be true that whatever you are experiencing is not how it is supposed to be. But *victimhood* is not your identity. You are a child of God. Wholeness and liberty – freedom that comes with responsibility – are near.

You may feel like a worker ready for the harvest. And it may be true that you see and are ready to give voice and action to a situation that is not as it is supposed to be. Even so, the savior of humanity is not your identity. You are a child of God *through* whom *God* can breathe loving compassion to inspire wholeness and liberation.

Every once and a while, when we are certain that we are correcting a situation that is not as it should be, we can become focused on finding fault; fixated on other people as wrong-doers or bad actors. Unchecked, we can allow ourselves to become motivated by our anger and frustration, rather than by God's loving compassion.

In all these circumstances, worshipping together returns us to a state of unity; not uniformity of thought or perspective, but of solidarity with each other – a state of genuine communion that recognizes our differences and transcends them.

Jesus didn't come for perfect people and the church has never been made up of perfect people. The church is a place where God fills *flawed* and *treasured* children of God with the presence of Christ in the Word proclaimed and in the bread and wine. We take Christ into our minds and into our bodies to make us whole and to free us from that which binds us.

Gathered at this table, we see each other as capable children of God, with access to sometimes untapped or forgotten resources, even if these are limited. Together, we seek forgiveness for misdirecting our outrage or frustrations, speaking unkindly about other children of God, rather than giving *prophetic* voice to situations that should not be.

Through this holy communion, God evokes and reinvigorates life-affirming action in each child of God.

Having taken Christ into ourselves, the Holy Spirit breathing through us is all the permission and capability that we need to point people to the realm of God's heaven that is near to them because, if for no other reason that they can see, we are near to them.

We participate in God's abundant, loving compassion. God can work through us to strengthen the weak, to make what is broken whole and to begin to make right what is not as it should be. God gives freely to us and through us and so, to paraphrase Rabbi Tarfon in the Talmud, "we are not

obligated to finish the work of perfecting the world, but neither are we free to abandon it."

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