

Pentecost IX

Jer. 23:1-6

Eph. 2:11-22

Mk 6:30-34, 53-56

St. Mary the Virgin

July 22, 2018

The Rev. Dr. Paula D. Nesbitt

...he had great compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd..."
Amen.

Jesus has become a first-century, religious rock star. His apostles, whom he sent out to teach and heal in his name, need some rest, far from the eager crowds; as does Jesus. The beheading of John the Baptist is likely weighing on all their hearts, and some time alone feels critical. But there is no time. The crowds surround them, flocking wherever they go, even to that remote place where they think Jesus is headed. They wait for his arrival. The Gospel describes them like desperately eager sheep without a shepherd, eager for the teaching, care, and healing he offers. The retreat is put on-hold.

Not only don't Jesus and his apostles get any rest, but they go on to feed the crowd of 5,000; Jesus walks on water; and then heal yet more awaiting crowds by the end of this passage. We sense the intensity and excitement surrounding his ministry, and also the exhaustion.

This is not a Gospel message about the virtues of workaholicism, but rather how great is the spiritual need for what Jesus offers. The author of Mark stresses the challenges of being an apostle of Christ. It's going to be exhausting, even in our own day; but God will provide. So what *does* God provide that sustains us? Focus, purpose, perhaps endurance, but also compassion. For example, instead of expressing exasperation at seeing the crowds at his retreat site, Jesus was moved by compassion. Compassion *gives* us focus and meaning, energy to endure, and the ability to transform our frustration when our own plans go awry.

Compassion is a central trait of God, freely and tenderly offered, throughout the Hebrew scriptures. Psalm 23, which we read and heard, is just one example. God is with us no matter what we must endure. God's promise of a Messiah, and God's very act of incarnation, coming into the world through Jesus Christ, were acts of divine compassion. Our word "compassion" comes from a Latin root, meaning to endure with (in Latin *cum patī*).¹ God endures *with* those who suffer, or who have lost their way, offering companionship in their midst and the strength to move forward.

Compassion is a key way in which we come to understand God's love. Compassion can change hearts and minds, and the course of history. Had Jesus not shown compassion to those who

¹ David H. Engelhart, "Compassion," *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*.
<https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/compassion/>

were not Jewish, or who were considered unclean or otherwise cast to the margin of society, Christianity would not have not become a world religion.

Today's passage in Ephesians clearly points to the centrality of Jesus Christ in creating one people out of a wide diversity of religious backgrounds and traditions. The Judaic law had created a wall between Jews and others, and in the early church tensions quickly arose between Jewish and gentile Christians, including who was entitled to be a member of the church, who could eat or socialize with whom, and whether they could be one body sacramentally.² It was Christ's compassion that had opened the apostles' hearts and who, in turn, opened the church to all. Everyone, Jew or Gentile, was on equal footing. Christianity would be free of Jewish purity codes, dietary restrictions, and other laws that set Jews apart from others.

Compassion also is a universal concept, found across the great world religious traditions. Some time ago, I mentioned my seminarian colleague, a Theravada Buddhist monk, who on my first day of class asked the question of our professor, "What is love?" In his tradition, there is no word for love as we know and understand it. The closest he might get to understanding how our Presiding Bishop describes Jesus, as "the Way of Love," would be to translate it as Jesus, "the Way of Compassion." To follow Christ means foremost to act compassionately toward others. It's really that simple.

"Love" is a difficult word, even in English, to get a clear sense of what is meant. We have only *one* word to express what other languages, such as Greek, have two, five, or more words to say. For me, compassion is a practical starting point for understanding and practicing Christianity as the "Way of Love." For instance, the Greek word that translates into English as compassion is understood as a form of love that prompts us to acts of kindness or mercy.³ A compassionate heart transforms indifference to hope and possibility. It tempers justice with mercy, and the rule of law with the need to consider the spirit or intention behind the law, taking into account our various humanitarian needs and circumstances.

Two weeks ago, at our church's General Convention in Austin, I felt a strong sense of compassion. The bishops and delegates, perhaps like modern-day apostles sent by their dioceses to discern and act on where they believed the Holy Spirit was leading them, were exhausted. Long days began with legislative hearings at 7 a.m. and ended after delegation meetings that lasted well into the evening. The days were emotionally exhausting as well. I was there for a few days, for some meetings and to observe, but I quickly sensed both the exhilaration and the exhaustion.

² Theodore O. Wedel, "Exposition," to The Epistle to the Ephesians, pp. 595-749, in *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick. Vol 10. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1953, p. 650.; Francis W. Beare, "Introduction and Exegesis" to The Epistle to the Ephesians, pp. 595-749 in *The Interpreter's Bible*, pp. 655-658.

³ Engelhart, "Compassion," <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/compassion/>

At the end of a long Sunday, which had begun with more than 70 bishops leading a public witness and prayer vigil against gun violence, followed by another prayer vigil attended by about 800 church members at an immigrant detention facility about an hour away, many were weary when, late afternoon, both the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops convened their legislative sessions. I sat in the House of Bishops' gallery as they began discussion of a covenant to pledge to hold one another, as bishops, accountable to seek changes that would combat gender and sexual abuse, harassment, and exploitation in their dioceses.⁴

Toward the end of their discussion, one bishop from a conservative diocese took the microphone and said that, "after listening to all of my sister bishops testify in favor of this covenant, I have to pay attention. Therefore, I'm supporting it." He had been moved to compassion by their testimonies, many who spoke of the sexism and harassment that they and other women had endured in the church, simply in trying to live out their call to ministry. His voice gave momentum to the covenant's passage, which it did by an overwhelming voice vote. Compassion, in that moment, was God's way of moving the bishops into closer relationship, bonded by mutual care and mutual respect.

At the prayer vigil held at an immigrant detention center earlier that day, our Diocese of California delegate Deacon Hailey McKeefry Delmas later wrote an account that I'd like to share with you:⁵

Today... [w]e went to the T. Don Hutto Residential Center... currently used to detain non-US citizens awaiting the outcome of their immigration status ... this center now houses only women. ... Some vigil attendees brought signs and posters with them, but all of us carried compassionate hearts.

...Bishop Marc and Sheila Andrus...made their way to the front of the facility and encouraged us to follow. ... Several police cars arrived, but they seemed intent only on ensuring order....

In a way, being there was heartbreaking...because it was so clear that there was so little that we could do. Could these women see us through the narrow windows or hear us through the thick walls? Was there any way that our witness could turn the hearts of those in power? And then we saw it.... tiny hands waving at the windows...and a white cloth being slid up and down the window pane (sic) like a signal flag. The women knew we were there!

Together, we shouted even louder over and over again:

⁴ Melodie Woerman, "Bishops adopt covenant pledging to work for equity and justice," Episcopal News Service, July 8, 2018. <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/article/bishops-adopt-covenant-pledging-work-equity-and-justice>

⁵ Hailey McKeefry Delmas, "They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love," July 10, 2018, Diocese of California. <http://diocal.org/news/they-will-know-we-are-christians-our-love>

“We see you!!! God loves you!” “We see you!!! God loves you!”

... And then: “You are not alone!” “You are not alone!”

...And we waved back wildly. And I cried. These people, who we call “refugees” and “immigrants” are part of our human family. They are people who want freedom, family, and peace. These people who are called “guards” and “officers” are part of our human family. They are doing a hard job the best they know how. I know that our country is afraid. We are afraid of those we believe are “the other”. I know that we instinctually fear that there is not enough to go around. We can make political arguments. We can create laws. We can arrest people in crisis. None of it changes the truth: This is not the behavior that God wants from us. We have to do better.

One song that we sang both last night and today is one that I’ve known for my whole life “They will know we are Christian’s by our love.” I think this is the measuring stick we must apply to ourselves. As a great preacher said to me yesterday, love is what brings us life and God wants us to be alive. We have to love each other. I ask you. Which of these says love to you?

Compassion is also key to healing, especially after a bitter conflict, or when a nation and its people have been torn apart. Compassion helps make forgiveness and reconciliation possible. Compassion, as the seeds of love, can be transformative. Jesus, time after time, was moved by compassion to set aside his own attitudes and agenda, and to encounter people and situations that transformed his understanding of who was included in God’s Kingdom and in God’s love.

Where in your life is God calling you to bring a compassionate heart, to listen and act in ways that can bring hope and healing to others?