

## **Ninth Sunday after Pentecost July 21, 2024**

**Jeremiah 23:1-6; Ephesians 2:11-22; 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. It also is like faith in that it leads to action. Feeling compassion leads to acting compassionately. To move to address the situation that has caused such *splagidzomai* in you.

Newly arrived from their work in partnering with Jesus in proclaiming that the reign of God has come near, the apostles are called by Jesus to come away for a time of Sabbath rest. But the people see and recognize them- these are the people who have just been doing amazing things in their communities, and hurry to get to where they are going. So, when Jesus and the disciples come ashore expecting to rest from their labors, they see this large crowd.

Jesus could have turned them away. Focused on his and his disciples' needs. Instead, he has compassion on them. Their need, desire for healing, learning, acceptance, love is so great it moves his guts- *splagidzomai*- pulls him outward into relationship with them. They are like sheep without a shepherd- not knowing where to go to find still waters and green pastures. Not sure how to stay safe from the wolves of the world. So, Jesus does what his proclaiming, what his guts tell him to- teach, heal, feed, love. Things the crowd cannot find in the reign of the world but they can find in Jesus because this is what it means to live in the reign of God.

In our first reading today, 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 warns the people of God that their leaders (religious and political) have led them astray. They are worshipping other gods, while still going through the motions of faithfulness to YHWH. Their leaders have abandoned the Torah and so there is social injustice- towards widows, orphans, the poor, the aliens in their land. 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. God promises to gather the flock and to raise up a new king from David’s line. Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise.

A king who looks at the sheep 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 will send, Jesus. Because that is what the reign of God looks like.

The texts today raise an interesting question, what are the leaders we follow- governmental, religious, media- moved by? Are the leaders we follow moved by compassion for everyone? Or something else?

Compassion and community are two key characteristics of the reign of God that Jesus proclaims has come near in him. Compassion, that 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 whom they are feeling compassion for.

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? All others?

Compassion- a pull to attend to the suffering of others- is a primary characteristic of God in the Hebrew Bible. It is the defining characteristic of Jesus, God's Son- he is moved by the leper, the paralyzed man, Jairus' daughter, the woman with the flow of blood, the list goes on. All these Jesus shows compassion to, mercy to.

Sociologist Rodney Stark in his 2011 book, *The Triumph of Christianity*, reminds us that “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 (their concept of) 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 compassionate and merciful reign they found life. In this compassionate and merciful reign, they saw not division, but their shared humanity. In this compassionate and merciful reign, they experienced a life fuller and more abundant than life would otherwise be. They found a life worth living.

Jesus brings with him a renewal of our imagination. He gives us the ability and the hope to imagine a world different from what is. In him, as Paul reminds us, all divisions and walls that we like to put up are shown to be so much bullshit. Because Jesus crosses through them, because they don't really exist. In God's eyes there is no righteous and sinners. There are only the righteous/sinners. There are no healed and broken. There are the broken/healed ones.

And we, like the disciples, are both caught up in that imagination and given the power and authority to dream along with Jesus. And when we do. When we feel compassion and act on it. When we see not divisions, worthy and unworthy, them and us, but instead see all as beloved humans created in the image of God. When we strive to bring just a glimpse of the reign of heaven into view. Then amazing things happen. Thanks be to God.

The [Rev. Dr. Delmer Chilton wrote in a 2018 article for the \*Living Lutheran\*](#) magazine about a small congregation from years ago, 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 with sawhorses and plywood. They were served by a lay pastor from a town 50 miles away. She drove out on Sunday mornings for worship, visited the sick, and then headed home by late afternoon.

There was a man in the congregation who become concerned about the health of the church's nearest neighbors. Some of the folk who lived near the church, few of whom were members, 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 things 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 insecure 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. Then one day, 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 weren't thinking, "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." They wondered because they had done all that they had done because, like Jesus, they had compassion on those around them. And that moved them to act compassionately. 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, both the feeling and the action. And through that compassion people felt the touch of the reign of God. And it fired their imagination. To believe that the world didn't have to be the way it was.

The reign of heaven does not exist just because you have a big congregation with lots of programs and people. It exists where people have compassion for one another. Where people feel connected to those in their midst who are suffering and work to alleviate that suffering. Where people pronounce all are welcome, and they do mean all.

Friends in Christ, God can and does act this way in and through you. As you live out the reality of who you are. A beloved child of God claimed in the waters of baptism and empowered with unique gifts by the Holy Spirit. God acts this way through you as you look closely at others and see in them the image of God. As you cross those barriers that society and (God help us!) even we put up sometimes. Barriers of class, race, politics, age, wealth. Barriers of deserving and undeserving. Barriers that we know, thanks to Paul's reminder and Jesus' example, don't really exist.

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. This life of faith, this reign of God is about our neighbor, our enemy, the one who is suffering and the splanchnicai we show to them. That they too 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 this is the blessing for all of us. To feel that splanchnicai for others and act on it, and to receive that compassion from Christ and our neighbor. And in so doing, both in giving and receiving-experience, even for a moment, the joys of the reign of God.

May the compassionate Christ fire your imagination this day and may you share that vision with all you meet. Amen.