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AMDG

Pentecost 2, Proper 6A

This week's Gospel is one we may not have heard for a while. Because of the three year cycle of readings we follow, and the way Easter and Pentecost have fallen in the last few years, this particular Gospel reading was last read nine years ago, 2008. That's not to say we haven't heard this story before. The sending out of the disciples is in Mark and Luke. And, we heard their versions last summer and the summer before. However, there's a verse in Matthew's version that isn't in Luke and Mark's versions, which is very special. I wonder if you caught it.

"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

Isn't that a beautiful verse?!? Jesus looking out with eyes of compassion on the harassed and helpless. Not with eyes of pity, or eyes of disdain, or judgment. But, with eyes of mercy. The same eyes of mercy and lovingkindness with which God looks upon us. Later, after the Prayers of the People, in the concluding collect I will pray, "Look with compassion upon us and all who turn to you for help, for you are gracious, O lover of souls." It is my favorite of these collects, and it creates a beautiful image of God, that I'm sure we can all relate to. It is the image in today's Gospel of caring and compassion. This image of God resonates with us, because in our own times of feeling harassed and helpless, we may have experienced God standing beside us, suffering with us, and perhaps shouldering some of our burdens. It is with that deep-seated knowledge of God's love and mercy that the disciples are sent out, and with which we try to be the body of Christ within our walls and beyond our doors.

But, perhaps we've experienced times when we were feeling harassed and helpless and reached out only to find emptiness and silence. Jesus even felt the same momentarily while on the cross, "My God, why have you abandoned me." And, when we are feeling disconnected from God's compassion, helping others is pretty far down our list of things to do. At my lowest, I often feel more critical and judgmental of others. How can we extend God's lovingkindness upon others when we have a hard time feeling it ourselves?

Just a couple of chapters before in Matthew, midway through the sermon on the mount, Jesus warns his disciples about looking upon others critically, saying, "For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." Perhaps the disconnect isn't from God's end.

Perhaps it's from ours. I've known for a long time, that when I'm judging others, deep inside I'm really judging myself. If we judge ourselves harshly how can we keep from judging others, and if we judge others and ourselves how can we experience the compassion of Christ? It's viscous and discouraging cycle.

This week I had the opportunity to witness the compassion of others. On Tuesday, Deacon Rodger arranged for Sally and me to accompany him to the Hogar de Esperanza y Paz, the Home of Hope and Peace. We met a small group of young people and their adult leaders from St. Mary Magdalene in Boulder, Lada and David Harwick's other parish. It was a wonderful experience to see the hands of Christ in action right in our own backyard. In one of the poorest colonias in Nogales, volunteers have created an amazing community center that serves impoverished women and children of the neighborhood. Children are fed breakfast and lunch. They receive tutoring later in the day. Adults can come in the evening and get assistance in finishing their educations. And, women from the colonias work in the sewing room to create beautiful handicrafts for sale. The center was begun by some of the poor women of the area who noticed that there were children going hungry. It has been run cooperatively by the people of the neighborhood for over forty years. It really struck me that it was the poor of the neighborhood who started this miraculous project, and it is the poor who keep it going. It was the eyes of poor women who looked with compassion on those more vulnerable than themselves, and were moved to share God's love with their neighbors.

Later that evening, when the delegation of young people came here and shared a meal and prayed with us, I was struck by what was shared by the youth. They also looked with eyes of compassion, and were moved deeply. Several shared how it put their own privileged lives into perspective. They were struck by the joyful welcoming nature of the children at the center.

This experience reminded me that there are no perfect conditions under which we go out into the world to be the body of Christ. The disciples were even warned that they were going out among wolves, and that they would experience rejection in their work. If we wait to be in the best of spirits, or in the ideal circumstances to do Christ's work in the world, then it will never get done. In fact, it may even be ideal to extend Christ's lovingkindness when we aren't in the best of shape.

Perhaps in order to feel God's compassion, we need to extend that compassion to others. In twelve step programs of recovery, it's often recommended that when one is experiencing hard times that they reach out to help others. I've certainly found that when I'm feeling a little down, just making a call to check on how someone is doing lifts me up. It is a blessing to help others.

My brothers and sisters, Jesus sent out his disciples and sends us out into the world to proclaim God's kingdom of compassion and mercy come near; and to offer God's lovingkindness to all. This is the life of the Spirit into which we were baptized. Our lives are only fully lived when we follow in his footsteps, looking with compassion upon the harassed and helpless, lifting them from their beleaguered lives and empowering them to go out to do the same for others. Let us not become so preoccupied with our own concerns and endeavors that we neglect to live the life Christ set out for us. I'd like to end with this poem about the body of Christ, attributed to St. Teresa of Avila.

Christ Has No Body

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.