

Proclaiming the Kingdom (14June2020)
Matthew 9:35-10:8; Romans5:1-8

“When he saw the crowds, Jesus had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” (Matthew 9:36)

This week, as I first read about those crowds, I was thinking about protesting crowds, about people of color, about those around us who might be described as harassed and helpless, who have suffered undue violence, who are neglected in the pursuit of justice, whose voices and even cries for help are often disregarded. I was thinking about the amassing of crowds who're fed up.

As sheep without a shepherd, I was remembering that a shepherd was a common biblical image for leaders or rulers. Those ancient crowds without a shepherd were stuck under Caesar and the Roman Empire, certainly not a ruler who was mindful of caring for the flock, but only for self-interest of power and personal glory. The local toadies were no better, henchmen put in place by and to please Rome.

So for current crowds trying to insist that “Black Lives Matter,” we have to recognize that leaders and shepherds have failed them, doing little to improve their situation or care for their plight. The current shepherd of this nation directly verbalizes his view of law and order, using his rod and staff against the sheep instead of on what hurts them, proclaiming his intention to keep the sheep away from green pastures and still waters that would be sustenance of life, clearly not trying to comfort them and lead them through valley of the shadow of death.

For Jesus' reaction then and perhaps his reaction now, we shouldn't be surprised: it says he had compassion. This isn't a little rosy tender-eyed Hallmark card, though. The original word relates to intestines or guts. When Jesus saw the crowds, he had a visceral reaction. It was gut-wrenching.

Now, we could ask if the news has been gut-wrenching for us and whether we're really having compassion. But I don't believe that's actually the helpful place to start. Let's stick with Jesus and the Gospel.

Jesus is proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of heaven, and he is curing and healing and driving demons away and bringing in outcasts. And he sends his followers to do exactly the same thing.

Let's unpack that: The good news of the kingdom of heaven. That's absolutely not a sales pitch, like “Hey, if you sign on the dotted line and become a card-carrying Christian, then you'll get to go up to heaven after you die.” Please don't make Jesus into that. Please don't diminish or distance his good news. Hurting lives aren't helped by being told to convert to a new religion because it could help after death.

With Jesus as a shepherd having compassion is how we should approach this language of the kingdom. This is contrasting the bad shepherds or rulers who are careless or even malevolent with the shepherd who does care, who seeks to protect the sheep and give them life. If Caesar and Herod and our society are kingdoms of bad shepherds, then the kind of compassion from a good shepherd is what Jesus means by the “kingdom of heaven.” It's not a place, but is God against harm, is the rule that cares for those who are helpless and harassed. Jesus and his followers do have good news to proclaim, because the oppressive empire is being opposed. The selfish who harm life won't so simply get their way anymore. The lives that were ignored receive the attention they need. That is good news. The kingdom is a movement.

We should also primarily hear that for what Jesus and his followers are doing. They're healing. They're bringing in the outcasts. They're keeping forces of evil at bay. To picture these as extraordinary spiritual powers is the same as relegating the kingdom of heaven out of this life: it dismisses and distances. It makes it otherworldly and not happening around us right now.

We, of course, know that disease is being healed right now. We know that when some would ignore sickness and just want to get on with their own business and pretend everything is okay, others are doing the hard work of caring and curing through coronavirus. We know it's not simple solutions. We know there are those opposing evil,

trying to block it, to keep more harm from being inflicted. We know there are those who seek to bring in the outcast, even if it risks their own status.

Doug Johnson this week made one such association: a business owner in Monona has caught attention* and some negative publicity for allowing a homeless man, named Bob Limbach, to sleep behind his building.

A situation like that, or maybe a feeling as people joined the march last Sunday evening, helps point us to the verse in Romans about boasting in our sufferings.

This confusing line made me think of the scene from “Grumpy Old Men” where the two old guys are trying to outdo each other with health problems**:

I need something for my lumbago. The pain is killing me.

Ah, he doesn't know the meaning of the word pain. I had a gallstone the size of a baseball.

Gallstones, yeah. Gallstones are for [wimps.] When I had the shingles, did you see me in here complaining? Shingles, schmingles. When I had my ulcers...

The biblical form of suffering gladly isn't that.

Maybe instead it's the way we intentionally associate ourselves with the suffering of others. Taking on the notoriety of the outcast homeless person. Trying intentionally to understand the disparities for black people. Adapting to what it means to be a trans person needing health care, or a bathroom. Extending ourselves to assist those whose livelihoods are displaced, or who can't keep up with change. Identifying with immigrants. Certainly in these months we've known it as restricting our own lives so that others don't risk infection as much. When we connect ourselves to others who are in a tough place, when we suffer somehow by choice, I'd say that's a closer version of suffering gladly.

You may recognize this, not only in the world around us but maybe in your own life. You may know solidarity. You may count yourself an ally. You may well want to help.

But I also suspect you're a lot like me and not really all that glad about suffering. You may find a

lot of the news gut-wrenching, but you may not be all that eager for literal compassion, meaning “suffering-with.” It wears us out to go much further than tokens of change. We want a break.

Besides, we've got our own suffering, our own helplessness. Admittedly, we may be privileged rather than prejudiced against for the color of our skin. And in the end we may voluntarily give up not much. We may not be the most vulnerable to the virus and may expect top-notch treatment if we got it. We may be comfortable enough in our basic needs. Three pandemics of coronavirus, racism, and climate change may not impact us much. Yet we're not separate from the crowds. We're not our own shepherds. We're all are trapped in a system that fails adequately to care for us. Even if we don't have it that bad, sometimes we don't know how to help and sometimes don't really want to help and sometimes we need help.

We are sinful and helpless, it says.

Which is met by the good news that this isn't about telling you to get gladder at suffering, finally to condescend to giving up your privilege, coercing you to risk yourself to sickness, to imagine that you'll instantly choose to be selfless. It's not waiting for special powers.

Instead, this is about the love of the Holy Spirit poured into your heart. This is about Christ who died for you while you were helpless and sinful, not a pat on the back for your minimal efforts at proving yourself so acceptable or helpful. This isn't that you could go it alone, but that you needed a shepherd to care courageously and tend tenderly, reaching out to heal, to love.

The Romans passage goes on to acknowledge that God's love for you is proven because God reconciled you while you were still enemies. That may be an enemy of black lives, an enemy of those suffering, captive to empire and you cannot free yourself and sometimes don't even want to. So God shows up to free you, to proclaim good news to you, to heal your heart, to pour love into you, to give you guts of compassion, to reconcile you to Godself and to all else, making it possible that you

* <https://www.channel3000.com/anonymous-letter-to-monona-business-asks-owner-to-get-rid-of-homeless-person-behind-building/>

** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vB4TFXCrs>

can be sent as a healer and maybe even one who suffers gladly. This is God's work in you and the world, the spreading good news of the kingdom of heaven. Welcome to the movement.