

Sunday 18th June, 2017 - 2nd Sunday after Pentecost
Year A
Genesis 18:1-15
Psalm 116:1-2.11-18
Romans 5:1-11
Matthew 9:35-10:8

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

What is it that we are called to, as Christ's followers in this world? Of all the Gospels, it seems to me that Matthew is most focused on this question. John's Gospel has an almost Cosmic nature to it, based as it is on the image of Jesus as Word of God from beyond all time. Mark brings a dark edge to his writing, and is focused on the suffering as Jesus and how his ministry is shaped by this. And Luke tells the best story - don't we all love his Nativity stories that begin the Gospel. Where would our Christmas traditions be without Luke?

But Matthew brings a reality and a practicality to his Gospel that focusses on Jesus as Rabbi, and the message that he imparts to the disciples and the crowds that gather around him, about how to live, and how to treat one another.

It is no surprise, then, that we begin our study of Matthew in this long period of Ordinary Time, with Jesus amongst his disciples and the crowd, responding to their need, and giving them practical ways in which to minister. "Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness." Healing and liberation, Jesus says, are to be the hallmarks of your lives as followers of Christ - as agents of God's mercy and Grace.

We need to remember the central part of Matthew's Gospel is found in the Sermon on the Mount which, in this Gospel is much longer than in the other Gospels. So the themes of healing and liberation should not sound new to us.

Today's Gospel, then, also functions as a summation of Matthew's Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount, from which all discussion about discipleship originates. Discipleship that is not demonstrative of these two essential marks of the Kingdom of Heaven is not discipleship from Matthew's perspective.

This is critical for the disciples to remember at this point in time -- participation in bringing about the Kingdom of Heaven must bear the meaning of Emmanuel (God with us). God's presence heralds healing and liberation at hand. Discipleship that does not pass this litmus test may not hold up to Matthew's expectations of and standards for discipleship.

So to a couple of points about this Gospel. First, notice how the task of the disciples is rooted in the activity of Jesus. Before any commission or task is announced, we are provided with a summary of what Jesus has been doing in and around Galilee -- teaching in the synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and infirmity. It is out of his primary mission that the mandate for the disciples develops. Theirs is not the lonely task of spiritual entrepreneurs who blaze their own trail. Rather they are invited to engage in a mission established and undergirded by Jesus himself.

Second, notice Jesus' attitude toward and insight into the plight of the crowds. He has compassion on them, because they are distraught and helpless. The comparison of the crowds to "sheep without a shepherd" evokes a picture of bewilderment, lostness, and vulnerability. If we take the time - and make the space - to allow ourselves to be honest, many of us have and do feel "harassed and helpless" but can scarcely admit it to ourselves, let alone to others. It is liberating to see how Jesus' mission is to precisely people like ourselves, then.

Third, notice that Jesus' vision of the crowds leads to the rightness of the moment for mission. It comes as a surprise, to be honest.

The crowds, who have been pictured as a flock harassed and thoroughly exhausted, are now envisioned by Jesus as a bounteous harvest. In his compassion Jesus sees beyond their obvious aimlessness and confusion and declares that they are ready for the message of the kingdom. A very desperate situation becomes the appropriate occasion for mission, the time for harvest.

So, it is confirmed to us; feeling harassed and helpless is not a sign of failure but of being human!

Understanding this truth opens the door to hearing the second truth of this passage: that Jesus sees us and has compassion! The power of this description of Jesus also rests in its truthfulness. Jesus did not come primarily to teach or inspire, let alone to judge, but rather out of the abundant compassion of God for the world and in order to demonstrate that loving compassion through word and deed.

And the thing is: these two truths go together. The first - the truth about our situation and need - opens us to hearing and being transformed by the second - the truth about God's loving response. Indeed, without the honesty of the first, the second would be, at best, pleasantly irrelevant ("Thanks but no thanks for your compassion, Jesus, but I'm doing just fine.") and, at worse, offensive ("Who says I need your compassion, anyway? - I've got it all together, thank you very much!").

(By the way, can you recognize those responses in people that you know who are not open to hearing the message of Grace. I know I have - and in fact this passage today helps me to understand them and their reaction. They are not downright rejecting Jesus and the Gospel - rather they have yet to come to the point in their life when they can admit they need it!)

The pressure exerted by our culture in so many ways, both explicit and implicit, to have it all together, to be perfect, to have the ideal life and job and family is, I think, quietly crushing the spirit of many of our people.

And this is particularly true of that generation that has grown up having to display their (supposedly perfect) lives on social media. While the constant drive to take “selfies” and publish life updates and broadcast our thoughts via social media may, as many suggest, be a symptom of our increasingly narcissistic culture, it may also be a sign of profound and increasing insecurity, the futile effort of folks to deny that they are, indeed, harassed and helpless.

Today we are reminded of these two truths. First, that we don’t actually have it all together or lead the perfect lives and probably are sick and tired of pretending we do, so that we can hear, second, that Jesus didn’t come for perfect people, that the church has never been made up of perfect people, that it’s okay - indeed, incredibly helpful! - to admit that we all feel at times harassed and helpless, and that’s exactly why God came in Jesus in the first place and continues to come to us: to tell us that God loves not the persons we’re trying to be or have promised to be or want to be, but the ones we are.

Paul says “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” As followers of Christ we are called to honesty about our present condition; to love and mercy and compassion for one another, and to a heartening celebration that we are claimed by God - it is all about *whose* we are, not *who* or *what* we are. Let us claim that, and live it out as agents of God’s mercy and grace.

In the name of God, Amen.