

So...there's an awful lot to unpack in this morning's lection, but I want to consider three key phrases, and then I'll say a bit about what these phrases might mean for out witness in 2020.

*He had compassion for them.*

*He summoned them and gave them authority.*

*The kingdom of heaven has come near.*

***He had compassion for them.***

Webster's dictionary defines compassion as having a "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it." That is to say, when one is compassionate, they have an awareness of another's need, and a desire to meet such a need. Matthew is telling us that Jesus had a heart connection with the neighbors he encountered, and such a connection resulted in a deep commitment to healing, pastoring, and friending his neighbors.

Matthew tells us that Jesus saw the crowds, and he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless. How is it that a two-millennia-old story sounds so familiar? Another summer, another relentless heat beating down upon crowds who gather along the sandy shores of Galilee, or the cobblestones of Bastille Saint-Antione, or the grassy lawn of the National Mall, or the wooden planks of an Alabama bridge, or the asphalt streets of Watts, or the bricks of Tiananmen Square, and today the granite slabs and marbled steps of municipal plazas throughout our nation.

In any age, Pharaoh, and Caesar, and King, and Politician don't see names, they see numbers. They don't see neighbors, they see subjects. They don't see opportunity, they see inconvenience. And in any age, Israel, God's people, needs a shepherd – one who'll not only notice the needs of the people, but respond to them as well. Israel needs a presence of compassion.

***He summoned them and gave them authority.***

The sheep become shepherds, and their sheep, and their sheep, and their sheep, and so on, and so on.

Matthew tells us Jesus summoned twelve of his disciples to be like shepherds, to be a balm for the hurt and helplessness they saw. Twelve is symbolic – a nice tie-in to the twelve tribes of Israel. Regrettably, twelve is also exclusive. We know women followed Jesus and ministered alongside him, too. And we also know that the spirit of Jesus has been manifested in both Jew and Gentile alike, across geographies and topographies, demographics and centuries. Matthew gets to a more inclusive cloud of witnesses later in his account, but not as soon, nor as often as the modern reader would hope.

Regardless, twelve, or twenty, or two billion, or whatever number suits you, all followers of Jesus are called and empowered to do shepherding work. They'll chase lost sheep; illumine clean water and fertile, green fields; protect the vulnerable; give witness to angel choruses in star-lit skies; write psalms of praise; offer cloaks of warmth – none of this with an expectation of reimbursement or to build wealth, but rather, because they too have been shepherded with God's grace and love.

***The kingdom of heaven has come near.***

Shepherded compassion, coupled with shepherded authority will heal the world. God cares for us. God calls us to care for one another. God gives us authority, and indeed the ability to do that caring. When our caring is made tangible, moment by moment, we begin to declare our independence from Caesar's provisions by acknowledging our dependence upon God's provisions: each of one of us, and the love we can offer one another. In other words, when we love our neighbor, that is when we live with compassion, both in spirit and deed, the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Sardis Baptist Church, Jesus lived with compassion for those who were hurting and helpless. Jesus empowered and authorized all who would follow him to be agents of compassion. When the love and compassion that God has given to each

of us becomes expressed and reciprocated in the love and compassion we offer to one another, the kingdom of heaven is made manifest right here and right now.

I think one of the real challenges of our time, especially for privileged congregations like ours, is learning that compassion is not something that we prove, but rather is something that we live into; not something that we have, but rather is something that has us. In other words, compassion is not an errand, not a task, not some obstacle course to be conquered nor some checklist to be completed. Compassion is guttural, authentic, organic, emotive, spirit-based.

Compassion is also a tangible expression of our awareness. Yes, our arms and legs often propel our bodies into motion, but I would argue it is our heart that generates the inertia to move, and the endurance to sustain action.

In the past few years, we've had discussions about hunger, homelessness, eviction, child-trafficking, immigration, environmental crises, the kinds of food we eat, and gun violence just to name a few. Without fail, the women and men we've met who are living as God's shepherds to those affected by such issues have all shared something in common: they are acting from a sense of deep-rooted compassion. Somehow, somehow they've been moved by an emotional connection – like Jesus, they have seen hurting and helplessness, and they've decided that they want to channel their empathy into action. Another way to put it is that they've discovered they cannot be whole if their neighbors are not.

When we name someone who is hungry, when we put a face to someone who is homeless, when waters and lands in our own communities are damaged, when we see the value in the animals and plants that sustain us, when the loaded gun goes off in our neighborhood, we begin to better understand our neighbors. We begin to live with our hearts just as much as we think with our brains. And our acts of kindness, our acts of cruelty, and even more so our inaction no longer take place in a vacuum. We not only notice our mutuality, but we are bound to it.

I've seen that happen here: donations of canned goods, clothing, tithes, and prayers are not dues for you, they are an expression of your empathy and love for this community. And I've seen the inertia which your hearts have created – when you have passion it is accompanied by long tentacles of tangible love.

I think today, in this moment, it's time for us to approach an elephant in the room: our determination to be vocal, active advocates for so many justice-based causes is at odds with our equal determination to be passive advocates in the fight against systemic and institutionalized racism. Let me rephrase that: I think our privilege, both realized and unrealized, both consciously and subconsciously, has tempered our urgency to address so many issues that plague our community, issues for which many of us play a large hand in creating. For a church that prides itself on doing an awful lot to make God's love accessible and apparent to all, we have not yet done enough.

When we reckon with such a weighty issue, we are tempted to ask a question: What would Jesus do? Well I don't think that's the place for us to start today – the historical Jesus didn't live in 2020, we do. So I think there are some better questions to ask.

Where might we find the resurrected Jesus today? My intuition tells me we'd find him standing in solidarity with those who are protesting their invisibility; those who feel harassed and helpless, because of local authorities won't grant them the same privileges as people with lighter skin. I dare say we ought to follow Jesus in standing with our neighbors.

How do we suppose the resurrected Jesus might act today? My intuition tells me he'd remind our neighbors of their worth; he'd say, "Your lives matter, Black lives matter, Brown lives matter, Indigenous lives matter," and he'd call people like George, and Breonna, and Ahmaud by their names. I think he'd lament and grieve the loss of their lives; I think he'd weep on their sister's shoulders, just as he wept for Lazarus. And if he were white, which he definitely isn't by the way, he'd oppose glorifying a lineage of brutality and oppression with names, statues, and idols stilled in another age – Jesus certainly renounced the impeccable lineage that Matthew gave him, and he refused to seek the powers and privileges that would have accompanied that lineage. I dare say we would do well to act in a similar fashion as Jesus.

And when do we suppose the resurrected Jesus might act? Well...now, of course! And often as well. Not to mention that he would have already been acting.

**Unpacking a Compassionate Shepherd and Kingdom**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Proper 6, Second Sunday after Pentecost, 6/14/2020**  
**Matthew 9:35-10:8**



a spiritually  
progressive  
community  
of faith

Justice isn't waiting on God's arrival, justice is the onset of God's people acting in accordance with God's interest and with God's love. I dare say that we should act now. And often as well.

Friends, there is not a specific prescription for how congregants and faith houses should address systemic racism in their own communities. It's gonna be different for every individual and congregation. I do think that it requires asking honest questions, listening for hard truths, being intentional in making changes in our daily lives, engaging in real relationships with persons from different backgrounds, and assessing our own spiritual gifts and limitations. The work is neither easy nor comfortable, but it is necessary in helping us to model the compassion of the One we proclaim to follow.

But there is good news to help us in this hard endeavor. Jesus lived with a sense of compassion that is also inside each one of us. Jesus gave us the authority, ability, and responsibility to use our compassion as a healing balm. Most importantly, when we live in that spirit of mutual compassion – that's our willingness to both give and receive the love of God from one another – the kingdom of heaven is near.

God, may the nearness of your kingdom lure us away from the clinginess of privilege. May it be so, and may it be right now. Amen.