

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Proper 13-A (13 August 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Collect

Let your continual mercy, O Lord, cleanse and defend your Church; and, because it cannot continue in safety without your help, protect and govern it always by your goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Genesis 32:22-31, Psalm 17:1-7,16, Romans 9:1-5, Matthew 14:13-21

1 Beginning: Once upon a time...

What an incredibly difficult year. And it's just half-over! A world-humbling virus has threatened our lives and taken the lives of those around us, 152,000 people in the United States alone. We have been challenged by quarantines and lockdowns, months of isolation, deprivation, and handicap. Nearly all of us are living with elevated levels of anxiety and depression. Nearly all of us are struggling with the data, trying to make wise decisions about how we should respond to the pandemic, to care for those we love. We have made difficult decisions, doing the best we can, and wrestled with the feeling that our best might not be good enough.

The national GDP is down by 33% in the second quarter of 2020, the worst economic slow-down since World War II. What that number means is record unemployment, with tens of millions of people wondering how they will eat, how they will keep a roof over their children's heads.

Add to all this the sight of actual, undeniable video of a black man murdered on the street by a white police officer. In reality this is nothing new or unusual, but some of us, particularly white and middle class, were able to ignore reports of such things because they didn't accord with our understanding of our nation as a place of liberty and justice. Until the reality was pushed in front of our noses in living color, action, and sound. And that was hard to see, no matter what color your skin.

2020 has been a difficult year, a year like no other in living memory! What are we supposed to do? How am I called to respond?

The Gospel tells us that even in the trauma, God is present. Even in the guesses and second-guesses, God is at work, with us and for us. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus leads us into dealing with challenging times in three basic steps. These steps are compassion, prayer, and action. Compassion, prayer, and action.

2 Compassion

First is compassion.

Now keep in mind the context. Our lectionary book smooths out the reading, but if you read Matthew 14.13 in a proper Bible, the verse begins with the words, “Hearing this..” Because in the verses preceding today’s reading, Jesus hears some awful news. Jesus’ cousin John has died. The person who baptized Jesus and prepared the way for him was the victim of an extra-judicial killing by a government official. John’s head was hacked off with a sword. That’s why Jesus gets in a boat and tries to get away to a deserted place. He needs some time and some space to mourn. To lament. To get his head straight. To integrate this difficult news. And to figure out how God calls him to respond.

But Jesus doesn’t get any time to himself. Instead the crowd follows and arrives before him. And Jesus, when he sees them, is deeply moved. Jesus knows his own deep pain and it helps him to feel compassion for the crowds who have gathered around. So Jesus goes to them and, out of his own pain, serves the crowds, healing their sick.

Compassion is what happens when we take our own hurts and injuries and acknowledge them, learn from them, extrapolate from them to realize what other people are feeling. Compassion does not mean dismissing or minimizing our own pains and fears. No matter if we live in plenty or in penury, in privilege or in persecution: we each hurt. No two hurts are alike. It doesn’t help to compare your hurt to an other’s. Each of us feels things differently. Each of us has our own struggles. But absolutely your hurt can be a basis of relating, of empathy, of compassion. Compassion for *ourselves*, in right measure, leads us to follow the example of Jesus, leads us into compassion for *others*.

3 Prayer

After compassion comes prayer. This is what we see when the disciples follow Jesus’ example of compassion and speak to Jesus, pray to Jesus’, about the crowds. They say, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”

But here’s the funny thing about prayer. Jesus could have dismissed the people. Out of his compassion, Jesus could have fed the people single-handedly, could have turned the rocks into bread for the people. Instead, the disciples receive an unexpected answer to their prayer. Jesus tells them, “[The crowds] need not go away; *you* give them something to eat.”

We often think of prayer as us giving God marching orders. Asking God to do something on our behalf and then waiting for God to act. We try to change God with our prayers. But I have found in my life that prayer seems to change me more than it changes God. Through persistent prayer, *my* goals and expectations, *my* desires and priorities, are brought into alignment with God’s own intentions. I learn to see as God sees and to respond as God calls me to respond.

Sometimes God answers prayers by bringing about miraculous changes in the world around us. Sometimes God answers prayers by bringing about miraculous changes inside of us. God often seems to do both or either in response to prayer, prayer which opens our eyes and our ears and leaves us on the lookout to see how God is going to choose to respond. Occasionally God responds by parting the waters. Often God responds by transforming our hearts and our minds so that in us God’s will might be done on earth as it is in heaven.

4 Enough

Finally, we turn to from compassion to prayer to action. The disciples do what Jesus commands. They share what they have. Surprising them, though not Jesus, the little bit that the disciples have to offer in response to Jesus' calling turns out to be enough. It is more than enough! More than 10,000 people sit down and eat their fill, leaving 12 baskets of leftovers. Where the disciples felt inadequate, Jesus took their offering made in faith and provided amply.

Sometimes I find my own options for responding to sickness, to death, to monetary need or to food insecurity to be insufficient. Even now I find my own understanding of what is going on with this pandemic, and how I am called to lead St. Thomas' in response, to be too faltering, too ambiguous, too unsure. Every day I find my own understandings of race, my own education about white privilege, my own courage to confront white supremacy and the racism ingrained in my own heart to be too limited for the enormous task at hand. Yet, just as a tiny mustard seed can become the largest of all garden plants, so God can and does take the meager little bits I have to offer and use them to accomplish important, meaningful change in my heart and in the world.

5 Invitation

Jesus' invitation to us today is to nurture *in our own* lives the practices of compassion, prayer, and action. These things may look weak or unimpressive to those on the outside. These aren't the tools of power we normally see at play in our life together as a body politic. But these are the tools given to the church as we live into our calling to be the body of Christ in this time and place. These are the tools given to you and I, as Christians. Jesus could have changed the rocks into bread. God could change the world in any way God chooses. The way God chooses to work is through us. What we bring is enough. God brings healing to the world through us as we engage in lives of compassion, prayer, and action.

Amen.