
TELLING THE TRUTH, TWICE!

In the selection of lessons for Sunday worship, we generally follow what is called the Common Lectionary.

- It is based on the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—that when read side by side (syn-optically) include the same stories told in very similar ways, for the most part.
 - So we focus on each of those three gospels for a year at a time, with the Gospel of John interspersed, over a three-year cycle.

After a Gospel reading is selected, an Old Testament reading that supports or mirrors that Gospel is identified.

- A psalm is chosen that bridges from the Old Testament reading to the Gospel.
- Finally, the Second Lesson is basically a reading through the New Testament letters of Paul and others.

Some time back, a change was made to how the gospel readings are placed during the season after Pentecost.

- Rather than a lesson given, for example, for the “Second Sunday after Pentecost”, the readings were assigned a date during what is now called the Sundays in “Common Time.”
 - So, it has been six years since we had the passage from Matthew that I read a moment ago.
 - I think that’s unfortunate, because this reading serves as a wonderful bridge from Pentecost and Holy Trinity into the Sundays of the season after Pentecost.

So here we are in Matthew, just after the Sermon on the Mount as we hear JESUS sending out HIS disciples into the world.

- And this really is the focus of the lessons for this summer: the growth of the church through the mission of JEUS’ followers (hence the green of the season after Pentecost).
- And what makes this passage such a wonderful bridge and so important and powerful to all the readings that will follow in the weeks and months ahead is single line.
- It is this one sentence upon which I want to focus today as it serves not only as an introduction to Matthew’s characterization of the ministry of JEUS and HIS disciples,
 - but it also can shape our sense of mission and ministry today.
- *“When HE saw the crowds, HE had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”*

What I love about this line is both the succinct description of the people gathered around JESUS: *“harassed and helpless,”*

- and the equally succinct description of the motivation behind all that is going to take place across the rest of the pages of Mathew’s story of JESUS’ ministry: *“When HE saw the crowds, HE had compassion on them.”*

The power of this description of the crowds rests in its truthfulness,

- and not just about the people then, but also about us today.

Carl Boyle was driving home one day when he saw a group of young children selling Kool-Aid on a corner in his neighborhood.

- The kids had posted a hand-scrawled sign that said, “Kool-Aid—10 cents.”

Carl pulled over to the curb and approached the stand.

- A boy asked if he wanted grape or cherry.
- After placing his order, Carl handed the boy a quarter.
 - There was much deliberation as the children tried to determine how much change Carl had coming.
 - They rifled through a cigar box until they had come up with the correct amount.

As Carl sipped his Kool-Aid, he began to become uncomfortable because several of the children kept staring at him.

- Finally, the first boy asked if Carl was done.
- "Just about," Carl answered. "Why?"
- "Cause that's the only cup we've got," the boy replied, "and we need it to stay in business."

Does life ever feel like you're trying to run a Kool-Aid stand and you've only got one cup?

- Do you ever feel ill-equipped as a parent, sometimes at your wit's end?
- Or unsure about how to manage the changes in your health?
- Or challenged by how to respond to the unexpected transitions of life?
- Or helpless in how to deal with the loss of a spouse, or sibling, or friend?
 - How many today feel helpless and harassed in today's world because of their age, or gender, or ethnicity?
 - Those recently graduated from high school and college wonder if there is a clear future for them.
 - Those who have retired wonder if they are valued any longer.

If we take the time and allow ourselves to be honest, many of us have and do feel "harassed and helpless".

- Some time back, I asked my brother, an architect, if he prefers working on commercial buildings or private residences.
 - His response to me was, "I prefer to have less stress."
- Feeling harassed and helpless is not a sign of failure.
 - Rather it is simply a sign of being human.

Recognizing that is important because it can become a point of connection and relating with others.

In The Book of Joy, the Dalai Lama says, *"I always try to see myself first and foremost as just another fellow human."*

- *"That way there is no need for introduction."*
- *"If I see myself primarily in terms of myself as a fellow human, I will then have more than seven billion people who I can feel deep connection with."*
 - *"And this is wonderful, isn't it?"*
 - *"What do you need to fear or worry about when you have seven billion other people who are with you?"*

Knowing that everyone in this building feels harassed and helpless at times allows us to turn to each other in our own struggles, seeking the help and support of people who also have had or are having their own tough time.

- Sitting with people who will honestly admit to their own uncertainty and discomfort, at the very least, can reassure us that there is not something wrong with us, just because we struggle.
 - This is part of being human.

- More than that, sharing our lives with others creates relationships and bonds that can help to carry us through life.
 - There is a Tibetan saying that goes like this: “Wherever you have friends, that is your country, and wherever you receive love, that is your home.”
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Furthermore, sharing this truth that we, like all human beings, are at times harassed and helpless opens the door to hearing the second truth of this gospel passage:

- that JESUS sees us and has compassion!
 - The power of this description of JESUS rests in its truthfulness.
 - JESUS did not come primarily to teach or inspire, let alone judge, as so many believe.
 - Out of the abundant compassion of GOD for the world, JESUS came to demonstrate that loving compassion through word and deed is the way bring peace and change the world.
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See, here’s the thing: 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 to our situation and need.
 - Indeed, without the honesty of the first truth, the second would be, at best, pleasantly irrelevant.
 - (“Thanks, JESUS, but no thanks for your compassion, because I’m doing fine.”)

The pressure exerted by our culture in multiple ways both named and implied 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 people.

Guy de Maupassant has written a story called, “The Necklace.”

- The story tells of Mathilde, a young woman who dreams of making it in high society.
 - However, she is the wife of an ordinary French citizen.

One day, Mathilde’s husband obtains an invitation to attend an elegant ball.

- Thoroughly delighted, Mathilde borrows a beautiful necklace from a wealthy friend.
 - The stunning necklace draws many compliments from the other guests at the ball.
 - But before Mathilde can return it, she loses the necklace.
- Panic-stricken, Mathilde and her husband borrow thirty-six thousand francs and buy a necklace that looks exactly like the one that was lost.
 - Mathilde gives the new necklace to her friend without saying anything about what had happened.
- For the next ten agonizing years, the couple slaves and toils to pay back the huge sum of money they had borrowed.
 - They work two jobs each, sell their home, and live in a slum in order to raise the funds.
- After the loan is finally paid, Mathilde sees her friend one day.
 - She confesses what had happened and tells of the hardship through which they came to replace the necklace.
 - It is then that her friend, in shock, explains that the necklace Mathilde had borrowed was only made of paste and was worth less than five hundred francs.

Christians, the truth is that we actually don't have it all together, nor do any of us lead the perfect life.

- Most of us are probably tired of pretending that we do.

The truth also is that JESUS didn't come for perfect people, that the church has never been made up of perfect people,

- and that that's okay.

- Moreover, I think it is incredibly helpful to admit that we all feel at times harassed and helpless.

That's exactly why GOD came in JESUS in the first place,

- and continues to come in gospel proclaimed, and in lives honestly shared, and in compassion freely offered.

- GOD loves not the person we're trying to be, or have promised to be, or want to be, but the person we are.

- And it is in our words and our actions, both in here and especially out there, that we declare who we really are and what we truly believe.

I know that you hear that from me often, but I don't think we can hear it enough.

- Indeed, the gospel story that shapes our sense of what it is to be a community of faith and followers of CHRIST is, hopefully, what keeps bringing you back here on Sundays and at other times during the week.

- Our commitment to be a community of faith begins and ends with the two truths of this passage:

- that we are imperfect people who admit to being harassed and helpless;

- but that we come, again and again, so that we can hear and feel once again JESUS' profound promise of compassion for all of us.

- And that is the truth! Twice!