

“Expand the Circle”

Sermon by the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 with Jeremiah 23:1-6 and Psalm 23

July 21, 2024 – 9th Sunday after Pentecost

Earlier this week I came across a reflection that wondered: *What if this is the moment we choose to double down on our commitments to each other?*¹ The author who posed this question was commenting on the anxiety of these days. Some in our nation have never witnessed an assassination attempt on a current or former president and are reeling from the shock. Many of us – regardless of age or party affiliation – are feeling the heaviness of this moment. We are grieving our culture of violence and the havoc it has wrought. We are anxious about the state of our democracy, worrying whether our union can withstand the divisiveness. We are exhausted by the onslaught of violent rhetoric. Some of us are feeling all these things at once.

In times like these, it would be easy to double down on our convictions and vilify those with whom we disagree. But what would it look like if we chose, instead, to double down on our commitments to each other? What would it look like if we chose to draw near to one another, even when dialogue seems impossible? The author who posed this question ended her reflection this way: “This moment in history is calling for the best in us. Hold fast to the people who bring out the best in you.”

When we pick up the story of the Messiah’s ministry in Galilee, Jesus is encouraging his disciples to do just that. He doesn’t use those exact words, of course. But I wonder if this is one reason behind his invitation: *Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile.*

The disciples have just returned from their mission to the towns and townspeople of Galilee. Two weeks ago, we heard the story of Jesus sending out the Twelve, two-by-two, with “no bread, no bag, no money in their belts.” We know little of their experience on the road. The only thing Mark tells us is that: “They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.”

Last week, Mark took us on a detour to the courts of King Herod, where we witnessed a first century example of political violence: the vengeful execution of John the Baptist. We do not know when, exactly, John was beheaded; Mark reports it as a flashback. But, even if this horrific event is not fresh on the mind of Jesus, it is fresh on the mind of readers. The subtext of the Gospel is clear: There is no escaping the suffering of the world.

¹ Valarie Kaur, reflection posted on Instagram: @valariekaur

But, for a moment, Jesus tries. Although, less for himself than for his disciples, I think.

In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus learns of the death of John the Baptist and immediately withdraws “to a deserted place *by himself*” (Matt 14:13, emphasis added). But here, in Mark, Jesus gathers with his disciples. We pick up the story at the moment the Twelve are reunited with each other and their teacher. We can assume that they, too, have seen their share of suffering on their mission. After all, in order to cast out many demons and anoint with oil many who were sick, the disciples must have first come upon countless desperate souls.

As many of us know firsthand, even when one is called to a ministry of compassion and care, the work can take a toll on the caregiver. Jesus clearly knows this, too. For the first thing he does upon the disciples’ return is issue an invitation: *Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile*. After sending out the Twelve, he summons them in. He creates space for them to take time together in community; he encourages them to hold fast to one another, to support one another in the work of ministry.

Of course, their retreat is cut short. Turns out their time on the boat is their only respite. For many see them set sail and rush to meet Jesus and his disciples on the other side. In desperation and hope, people from all the towns flock to see this little band of miracle-workers – the ones who have been crisscrossing the countryside healing the sick. For Jesus and his disciples, there is no escaping the suffering of the world.

It would have been easy, at this point, to feel overwhelmed or resentful. To double down on a desire to withdraw and stay in the boat until a quiet shore could be reached. But, instead, Jesus chooses compassion. *As he went ashore, Mark tells us, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*

They were like sheep without a shepherd.

Whenever we see this image in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is used to describe a failure of leadership that has left the people vulnerable. As we hear in our reading from Jeremiah, false shepherds do not tend their flock; rather they scatter the sheep and neglect their needs. The people of Galilee are also a flock forsaken. And having heard a grisly tale from Herod’s court last week, this should not surprise us. For we know what kind of shepherd King Herod has been ... The kind to throw a lavish banquet for his courtiers while the crowds go hungry. The kind to sacrifice one of his own to protect personal interests rather than safeguard the well-being of the entire flock. Yes, the people are like sheep without a shepherd. Which is why they flock to the Good Shepherd on the lakeshore.

And Jesus, of course, tends to their needs. The scene the Lectionary skips over today is Mark's account of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. But there, beside the Sea of Galilee, he provides for the sheep in his care. And later – at the end of today's reading – Jesus attends to the sick from the villages or cities or farms of Gennesaret. As the Psalmist anticipates, the Good Shepherd sets a table before the people and restores them, body and soul.

But Jesus does one more thing that is not as readily apparent: He draws people together. Unlike the false shepherds who scatter the sheep, he gathers in the lost and the least. They recognize him of course, and flock to him on their own. But Jesus invites people into shared space. He calls the first crowd to sit down in groups on the grass; and he receives the sick of Gennesaret in the marketplaces – in the central gathering place of each town and city. As he does so, Jesus forms a new community, one bound in common by compassion and care.

Jesus and his disciples set out to rest awhile; they set out to support one another, to nurture a sense of community amongst the thirteen engaged in a shared mission. Instead, they find themselves in a position to expand the circle of care. And Jesus responds to the suffering he sees by drawing scattered sheep to himself, by ensuring the well-being of the larger flock.

We can learn some big things from these small stories – these vignettes that seem only to serve as links between the more dramatic narratives of Mark. The first scene reminds us of the importance of holding fast to one another as partners in ministry, especially when the brokenness of the world weighs heavy. Everything that follows reminds us that we must also hold fast to others – to expand the circle of care, to respond to suffering with compassion, to double down on a commitment to one another. For, as Jesus shows us, compassion creates community. And community ensures the flourishing of the flock.

When the church is at its best, we do all these things. We continue the ministry of the Good Shepherd by expanding the circle of care and tending to the needs of those who seek help and hope. We live out our calling to be partners in Christ's service by allowing the suffering we see to bring out the best in us and responding with compassion. We hold fast to each other – care givers and care receivers alike. When the church is at its best, you know it from even the small stories that are told.

Pastor and professor Rodger Nishioka tells a story he heard while researching the religious experience of young adults.² He was holding a focus group in Iowa, when he met a young couple who were unusually committed to their church. As we know, that's becoming more and more rare, so Rodger asked them, "Why?"

² The following illustration includes both paraphrase and direct quotes from: Dr. Rodger Nishioka, "On Living, Dying and Rising," sermon preached on April 17, 2016, at Village Presbyterian Church (villagepres.org).

This husband and wife grew up in Presbyterian churches in New Jersey. They met and fell in love at Rutgers and married after graduation. Then they were recruited by different firms to come work in Des Moines. Neither had ever lived outside of New Jersey. But they were young and able to let life take them to new places. So, they decided to leave their families and move to the Midwest.

When they arrived in Iowa, this couple began looking for a church home. But not in earnest. They visited one congregation twice, but never registered their attendance.

Then, after living in Des Moines for three years, the young woman discovered a lump in her breast. She assumed it was nothing to worry about. But, after talking with her mom, she decided to get it checked out. A few weeks later, she got the news: It was Stage IV cancer. The doctor had seen this kind of cancer before. It was very aggressive. He was worried it had already spread.

Her family flew out from New Jersey and was there when the young woman went in for surgery. At the hospital the admitting clerk asked about her religious affiliation. She mentioned that they were Presbyterian but didn't have a church in Iowa. They had visited one church a couple times, she told the clerk, but they didn't remember the pastor's name. The clerk assured them the chaplain could find that out for them.

The chaplain called the church and spoke with the pastor. He remembered the young couple visiting and came directly to the hospital to pray with the young woman before surgery. He stayed the whole day, praying with her husband and family.

When she was released from the hospital, her husband was her only support when her family needed to go back to New Jersey. Together, they were working on a schedule to return during her upcoming treatments. But on this particular day, it was just the couple.

The husband had to go into the office for a few hours. So, the young woman was home alone when she heard a knock at the door. She wasn't expecting anyone, so she ignored it. But the knock was persistent. Annoyed, she went downstairs and opened the door. There stood a lovely older woman holding a paper bag sideways. She introduced herself and said she was from "the church."

The young woman asked, "What church?" and the woman named the church where the pastor served. She'd brought a casserole and freshly baked rolls and some vegetables she'd canned over the winter. She said she was sorry to hear what had happened and told her the whole church had been praying for them.

Then the older woman asked if she felt like some company, and the young woman said, “Actually, I would love company right now.” So, they sat in the living room and introduced themselves and prayed together and laughed and cried. When the young woman got tired, she apologized and said she needed to go lie down. The older woman said, “Of course. And I do not mean to be rude, but I’m looking around, and your place needs some cleaning. If you don’t mind, while you go upstairs, I would be happy to clean down here.”

Later the husband came home and, noticing the difference downstairs, asked his spouse, “Baby, did you clean?” And the young woman explained that someone had come from church. “What church?” he asked. “The pastor’s church,” she explained.

The next afternoon, there was another knock. The young woman opened the door to find a rather uncomfortable looking older gentleman. “May I help you?” she asked. And, after checking he had the right house, he thrust a bag at her and told her it was a chicken dinner and a pie his wife had prepared. He said the church was sorry to hear about her illness, and that they were praying for them.

She asked if he’d like to come in for a visit, and he said he didn’t want to trouble her. But he had noticed that the screen door was broken and, if it was okay with her, he would be glad to fix it.

When the young woman’s husband got home, he asked, “Baby, did you fix the screen door?”

“No,” she said, “a man came from the church.”

“What church?”

“The same church. The pastor’s church.”

This congregation of just 114 members – all of them in their 60s or 70s or older – provided a meal for this couple every single day for six months. When the couple told Rodger Nishioka this story, the young woman looked at him with tears in her eyes and said: “I have already told my family and friends in New Jersey: Whether I live for six months, or six years, or 60 years, I am never leaving *our* church. I am going to die here in our church.”

When the church is at its best, it is the kind of community that expands its circle of care to embrace those who are suffering, to offer compassion to those who need help and hope. When the church is at its best, it continues the ministry of the Good Shepherd by tending to bodies and to souls. It can show us what it looks like to double down on our commitment to each other, to hold fast to one another and to our neighbors in need. It can bring out the best in us, inspiring each of us to use our gifts to contribute to the flourishing of the flock.

The times we live in remind us that we *do* need space for reflection and rest, that we *do* need to surround ourselves with those who support us in ministry. But, like those first disciples, we are

also called *not* to withdraw from the suffering of this world, but to come close with compassion. And, when we do hold fast to one another – those in our circle of care *and* those who are clamoring for help – we find that the whole community flourishes, just as the Good Shepherd intended. All of us, a community bound together by compassion and care, will flourish.