



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

2nd Sunday After Pentecost

Sunday, June 14, 2020

Scripture Passages: Romans 5:1-8 & Matthew 9:35-10:8

+ In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Esplanchnisthe. Now there's what my Grandmother used to call a ten-dollar word. It's difficult to pronounce but it's absolutely crucial to how we understand our faith. Esplanchnisthe is the Greek word that our Gospel from St. Matthew also revolves around this morning. Esplanchnisthe means compassion. But it's stronger than what we mean by that in English. Listen to how it's used:

Then Jesus made a circuit of all the towns and villages. He taught in their meeting places, reported kingdom news, and healed their diseased bodies, healed their bruised and hurt lives. When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd.

You see there is a depth of feeling here that goes beyond just an emotional feeling, or even a spiritual feeling. This word describes a physical feeling. Jesus saw the masses of people and it agonized him physically, spiritually, and emotionally to see the crowds.

So this word expresses a compassion that springs from the deepest part of Jesus' being. Maybe we would call it heartfelt compassion. In other verses where esplanchnisthe is used in this Gospel, Jesus acts too. He cures the sick, restores sight to the blind, and feeds the crowd. So I think this word necessitates action as well.

And that's important. So often in the Gospel as people's misery in illness, mental challenges, prejudice and poverty is revealed, the religious authorities of the time called these things sin. And in their pride looked for the destruction of those they perceived to be sinners.

But it's in how Jesus encountered the very same people that we see the heart of God for us. Because Jesus in His love for the people – for us – went about healing them, restoring them physically and spiritually.

And consistent with the heart of God, he not only healed us but he died for us. That's how deep and broad God's compassion for us is. That's why St. Paul can say:

Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

So this is who God is.

And we? Well we are the harassed, and helpless - like sheep without a shepherd. We know we are. We hear the resonance of this story in our hearts these days.

You know last week I said in my Pride sermon that I thought much of the hurt and upset in our world is caused by our distance from God and by extension from each other for no one who knows the heart of God for us could despise or oppress the child of God in the other. I really believe that.

And so it must be distance - wilful or other that keeps us from the heart of God.

This is the human condition and the reason why we need God - as Jesus well knew.

And I have to say that the times we are in lay this truth completely bare. We do not - and never have - despite the shiny images we portray on social media (don't believe a single one of them however carefully curated) that we have it all together. That somehow our "success," our money, our possessions and images speak of perfect lives and perfect relationships. But all you need is one serious global event and all of that is exposed to be what it is: ephemeral: the gauzy, insubstantial, . . .

You see, we usually operate as if we don't really need God, and we don't need each other.

Except when rampant racism and prejudice rock our world and we realize that there is no "other" - we're one in Christ Jesus.

And except when there's a pandemic and we not only suddenly realize the value of community - but the value of communities gathered around a Gospel of love and relationality, intentional interconnection and profound care for each other. Families - not of blood relation, families of care bound by belief in a God who loves us unreasonably.

That's Esplanchnisthe at work.

For that is why Jesus came among us - why God sent God's son - to show us what God's love looks and feels like and how - if we let it - it could transform our life and of all those around us.

It all starts with love: Jesus looks out and has compassion for that harassed and helpless crowd and knew that it was time: time for a plan, time to scale up, time to let the mission of God loose on a world that had so much need for the Esplanchnisthe of God.

So he says: "the harvest indeed is plentiful, but the laborers are few," Jesus says.

I think we might have expected Jesus to immediately call the disciples to start work. Instead he says, "Pray therefore that the Lord of the harvest will send out laborers into his harvest."

And that's interesting. The action is in the hands of "the Lord of the harvest."

And it's important because Jesus is realistic: his task was overwhelming. The numbers huge. The scale, daunting.

So Jesus naturally calls the disciples to prayer: to pray for the power of God to raise up laborers to bring in the harvest.

Now I'd say that our instincts are probably pretty different. We would - if we prayed about the logistical nightmare facing Jesus at all, rather than just try and manage our way through it - so IF we prayed about it we'd probably pray for the following: for great preachers—brilliant scholars—talented musicians—wise administrators—effective fundraisers—people of great vision—people of means.

Don't get me wrong - all those folks are great. But while God can and does use extraordinarily talented people, there is an important truth here: most kingdom work is done by ordinary, nearly anonymous, behind-the-scenes disciples. So Jesus calls us to pray for common laborers. That's the plan. There's no plan B for the church. This is it. Ordinary people - me and you - have been part of the mission of God from the very beginning. And the first 12 laborers are mentioned -

Simon (they called him Peter,
or "Rock"),
Andrew, his brother,
James, Zebedee's son,
John, his brother,
Philip,
Bartholomew,

Thomas,
Matthew, the tax man,
James, son of Alphaeus,
Thaddaeus,
Simon, the Canaanite,
Judas Iscariot (who later
turned on him).

Now we don't know something about every one of them, but the ones we do know aren't in the extraordinary category – not by a long shot: from Peter to Judas, their flaws are painfully obvious. And I find that enormously comforting. SO much more comforting than to hear they were perfect in every particular.

And these ordinary saints were commanded – not cajoled or invited, but commanded to do the following in Jesus' name:

Heal the sick, Raise the dead, Cleanse the lepers and cast out demons. And we know from the Gospels and the Book of Acts that the disciples were able to do these things and more in Jesus' name.

But what of us? How can we, as disciples today – in a direct line – in apostolic succession from those imperfect 12 that are named, heal and raise and cleanse and cast out? Well, in the power of the holy Spirit I think we can:

First, heal the sick: what illnesses do we see? Oh we see plenty of systemic illness: racism – of so many kinds: anti-black, anti-indigenous; homophobia, transphobia, socio-economic exclusion. We know there are many more illnesses that we suffer in our culture and world.

We can and must proclaim the power of God to cast out those demons and heal these sicknesses.

Raise the dead? This one seems harder. But what about the death of hopes, dead dreams, dead ends. Proclaim the power of God to overcome death and instead to give life and new growth, new direction.

Okay, another challenging one: cleanse the lepers – let's think about who are considered to be the lepers in our culture? Who are the ones whom we shun, the untouchables, whom we quarantine and cut off? Are they the homeless? The substance dependent? The mentally challenged? There is a list that every culture conceals of people who are considered to be "lepers"

What does it mean to offer them cleansing? To remove the stigma they've been living with? To restore them again to the centre of community - the same community that shunned them in the first place thus effecting a double healing. Challenging stuff folks.

But as disciples, we can proclaim the power of God to effect restoration, wholeness and healing with confidence.

We are to cast out demons – to put away from us all that breaks the heart of God - the evil that we do to each other. Proclaim the power of God, of love over evil.

And in this commissioning text, the disciples are given some instructions. Interestingly in this part of Matthew, they're told to go to their own first. He says, "Go to the lost, confused people right here in the neighborhood. Tell them that the kingdom is here."

And folks, you and I know that it's honestly harder to love our neighbour in our neighbourhood than to go elsewhere. It's a discipline of love. That's one of the reasons I have been so encouraged by the food sustainability ministries that our Pandemic Response Fund is supporting. They are preaching the lived word of God. Having said all that, it's not long before the disciples being sent out to all the world so the mission starts at home and broadens out.

Esplanchnisthe. The heart of God for God's people – profound and heartfelt compassion and love. Jesus shows us this: the very heart of God. The God who is for us. The God who keeps on reaching out to us, and reaching in to our world. May we have the courage and the strength to do the same.

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