



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

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – July 18, 2021

Scripture Passages: 2 Samuel 7:1-14; Mark 6:30-34,53-56

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

Each summer we spend some significant time up in Georgian Bay. It's good to get away from the cityscapes we live in and for our eyes to be rested with green, with pasture, with crops. It's good to see livestock, deer, and fox and watch raccoons in their native habitat with an indulgent eye instead of annoyance – after all it's more their home up there than ours - contrary to our usual struggle with city raccoons intent on breaking into our garbage at home.

I remember a few years ago we drove up north just before the rain. Livy, our youngest, remarked on a bunch of cows lying down in the field. I said – as my grandmother had always reliably told me – that cows do that to preserve a bit of dry ground before the rain. And I said, “it's just good horse sense.” There was a pause and then from the back seat I heard her say, “but they're cows.” Much family laughter later, and an explanation that what's meant by horse sense is actually common sense. I guess this interchange was on my mind when it came to thinking through this week's sermon because both holidays and horse sense have a bearing on the gospel this morning.

So in the Gospel reading from last week, after Herod's horrid feast in which he had John the Baptist beheaded, his people took John's body to a tomb. And with one more dead prophet, the people, the crowd is left again directionless, bereft. They must have felt that God's voice to them had been silenced once more. Very hard.

But there was another voice, Jesus – and in Jesus they sense a great hope, and gather round him. Jesus and the disciples respond to their need. But soon they are run off their feet with the demands of this ministry so he takes his disciples away for a rest from their labour.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus' response to the momentum they were gaining for his ministry of repentance and love, is to call them aside to have a rest? I think that's an important acknowledgement of the demands of self-giving love.

I might even go further, and perhaps this says more about me than it does about the Gospel story, to say that I think I see here the acknowledgement that such love, poured out for others can also come with a shadow side – and that is losing yourself in the process. I think Jesus' actions here are just so important, so compassionate, so right.

Because with little effort we can identify with the busy life, the throng of demands, the ongoing needs, the pace of work, work, work. And many will identify with the dangers about not perhaps taking adequate care of our own needs – in the case of the disciples, eating properly - or at all because of busyness. We can identify with wanting to give of ourselves in the work of the church – it is urgent and it is important. But as life-giving as it is, it can also carry its own stress. And correcting that stress and that right-minded but costly over-work seems to be where the Gospel is going this morning.

Ha! But just like life, something else happens: just as Jesus gets the disciples into the boat to take them away to a deserted place for some rest and rest – the people saw them and got to their destination ahead of them. And Mark says that instead of insisting on their rest, Jesus instead responded to their obvious need and had compassion on them and began to teach them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

So what starts out as a story about the need for rest and restoration turns into a story of sacrifice and compassion. A story that is there for a reason. Perhaps it's there to be a model of ministry? A model of self-care? Or a general model of Christian discipleship.

Jesus shows compassion – compassion that asks a flexibility and a responsiveness and yes, a sacrificial attitude from us. Surely it's not that Jesus and the disciples will never get a rest – just that the people needed them now – and that the setting aside of their own need for rest, for a time – for a season – was just as important as fulfilling their own needs. Sometimes fulfilling the demands of our Christian discipleship means that it's not about us. That's not a popular thing to say I realize. We have invested a lot in appropriate boundaries, in personal wellness and this story is not here to mock or devalue those things. In fact, in a society that pushes at us constantly – where people are often doing the work of what used to be two people, where Covid-19 has erased the work/leisure boundary – and frankly our anxiety has meant that we seem to work all the time, that would be the last place I think we might take this reading from Mark. No, I think the clue to what is happening here is what was also happening in our story of David and the prophet Nathan and God in Samuel.

Perhaps you'll remember that King David's journey had been long and difficult, from pasture to palace, from shepherd boy to prince, from tenacious warrior to powerful king whose reign promised peace for the people at last, peace, and a place of their own. Now David, King of Israel by the grace of God, sat safely enthroned in Jerusalem and comfortable in a house of his own.

And he finally had time to compare his beautiful cedar home with the mere tent that sheltered the ark of God. The ark represented the presence of God among the people, and David realized, or rather, decides, that God deserves a house, too - a splendid house and home for the presence of God in their midst.

God, through the prophet Nathan, responds to David's construction plans by asking, in a sense, "Did you hear me complaining about living in a tent? No, I prefer being mobile, flexible, responsive, free to move about, not fixed in one place." God then turns the tables on David and says, I'm going to build you a house and God promises to establish David and his line "forever," and this is a "no matter what" promise, even if the descendants of David sin, even if "evildoers" threaten.

But what I'm really interested in in this story is that bit about God preferring to remain flexible, responsive and mobile. And furthermore that the Lord refused to be contained neither in fact, nor in the perception of God's people. I think that's really a clue to God's character. And it's certainly borne out in Jesus' actions as well.

When confronted by the needs of the people - the same folks who just had buried John the Baptist, the same who'd lost a prophet, a leader, what they'd thought was the prophet of the most high - were like sheep without a shepherd: directionless, unprotected, chaotic, searching - Mark emphasizes Jesus' compassion. And Jesus expressed it by offering teaching. Mark says, "and he began to teach them many things"; to give them direction, purpose and meaning. You know it's interesting, in Mark's Gospel, we are rarely told what Jesus teaches the people, but we are told how - with compassion. I think we can assume that it was teaching about 'the kingdom of God', and about a vision of hope and justice for all because that vision was Jesus' agenda for the whole of his ministry.

As one commentator says:

for Jesus, compassion is not just a feeling but a doing. And Jesus had to show his followers that compassion is inherent to discipleship. Compassion is a requirement on [our] part, even more so, an urge on [our] part. It hits [us] in the gut and sends [us] into motion for the sake of the other.

Think about its etymology - to have sympathy with, co-suffering, passion together. And so, this gut feeling should cause [us] to go outside of [ourselves]. That feeling deep in [our] gut that then radiates throughout your body like an adrenaline rush? Well, it will not go away unless you let it go into the places and spaces that need it, and need it desperately.

But all too often our compassion remains complacent. We might feel it, but don't do anything about it, don't act on it, don't advance its essential truth - [Here's the thing:], . . . there is no compassion unless it is known by the other - and deeply.

This is why Jesus was good news for the poor. Jesus proclaimed and lived in a different way – through com-passion, (co-passion) through teaching: changing hearts and minds by building a transformed and a community that transformed each other through love. There are different ways of approaching the Law, the scripture. For Jesus, it was not about keeping the letter of the law, but about living its meaning and espousing the hope and vision within them.

To offer leadership in teaching and in acts of mercy and compassion that bring healing and set people free from what oppresses them was – is - the shape of his ministry – and the shape of all our - all disciples' ministries. But the Gospel also contains a good dollop of common sense – horse sense - this morning – we are reminded that we are not the Lord although we do the Lord's work - and therefore need the discipline of rest and renewal in order to build the kingdom in the first place. Those are words to live by as we live through the midst of this exhausting pandemic. We are human – and have finite limits of energy for compassion.

Now Rob – as you are confirmed today, set aside as God's own, confirmed with the power of the Holy Spirit to be the face and hands of Christ, these are words to live by for a disciple of Jesus.

Sometimes the Gospel is very pragmatic: honouring the intention to rest from godly work, and yet with the priority of a great compassion are the messages of today.

These stories tell us about the character of God - and about how we are to be formed more and more like Jesus. That God is loving, compassionate, responsive and that we are to be so as well but allowing for our limitations. That seems to me to be very good horse sense!

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