

A Test of Endurance

Lynette Sparks

Third Presbyterian Church

June 18, 2017 (Second Sunday after Pentecost)

Romans 5:1-8 and Matthew 9:35-10:8

Everywhere Jesus went, he saw crowds, harassed and helpless, oppressed and thrown to the ground, untended, uncared for. Everywhere he went, he saw people harried and helpless, tested and tried, burdened and overwhelmed, looking for something – something good from Jesus – a healing touch, balm for a weary soul, a word of hope, the possibility of a future, the ability to imagine life beyond the life they knew.

Imagine with me, if you will, Jesus traveling about cities and villages in the present day...

Jesus went around the globe, and everywhere he saw crowds harassed and helpless. He went to London, and saw them standing outside the charred remains of Grenfell Tower. He went to the waters off Japan, and saw crews waiting for news about their fellow sailors. He went to a baseball field in the Capitol Region, and saw wounded legislators and staffers. He went to Minneapolis, and saw the family of yet another unarmed young black man fatally shot.

Jesus went to Rochester, and there, too, he saw crowds harassed and helpless. He went to the area known as the Crescent, and he saw people living on the margins of the margins. He saw a grandmother with six young grandchildren under her care, a home foreclosure notice in her hand. He saw special needs children in a school system that was failing them. He saw the young man whose best role model was a narcotics entrepreneur. He saw the Vietnam veteran struggling with PTSD, sleeping in a tent under the Susan B. Anthony bridge. He saw the young, teen-aged mother, still a baby herself.

Jesus went to Brighton, and Penfield, Fairport, and Pittsford. He went to Webster, Irondequoit, and Greece. He went to Chili, to Gates, and Henrietta. He even went all the way out to Victor. And there, too, he saw people harassed and helpless. He saw:

- The frustrated, angry parent who had reached her limit.
- The person in mid-life crisis because he lost his job.
- The one coping with the death of a loved one gone too soon.
- The one who struggles with depression or panic attacks.
- The one whose relationship with his dad is simply not what he'd imagined.
- The one who feels dismissed because of age, gender or gender identity, or ethnicity.
- The recent graduate who sees no clear future ahead.
- The retiree who wonders if she has any value anymore.¹

Jesus even walked into Third Church, and he saw people trapped in the anxiety of the present day that's described so well by David Lose: "The pressure exerted by our culture...to have it all together, to be perfect, to have the ideal life and job and family...[the pressure that's] quietly crushing the spirit of many of our people. [The pressure that's] particularly true of that generation that has grown up having to display their (supposedly perfect) lives on social

¹ Adapted from David Lose, In the Meantime, lectionary column for June 18, 2017, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/06/pentecost-2-a-telling-the-truth-twice/>.

media...the constant drive to take “selfies” and publish life updates and broadcast our thoughts via social media... [the drive that may be a sign of profound and increasing insecurity, the futile effort of folks to deny that they are, indeed, harassed and helpless.]”

“When Jesus saw the crowds in London, and Japan, and the Capitol region, and Minneapolis, and Rochester and all of its suburbs, and even in Third Presbyterian Church, he had compassion for them.” Visceral, gut-level, genuine God-with-us compassion.

Let that good news sink in for a minute. Jesus had compassion for them. Jesus has compassion for every broken and fearful person among us. Good news indeed.

Jesus knows how to do this – to heal the sick, to cure disease and dis-ease, to cast out demons of every sort. As Alexander Wimberly wrote, “No distance is too great, no audience too skeptical, no disease too severe. Jesus gets it done.”²

Except we all know that’s not how Jesus chose to continue his work. Jesus asked his followers to carry on his ministry after him. That would be...us. Look at the list of apostles he sent out...there’s Peter – we have a Peter. There’s an Andrew – we have at least one of those in our congregation. There are two James and then there’s John - I know we have at least two James and more than one named John. And a Thomas, and a Matthew, and a Philip. We’re already up to eight of the twelve.

I didn’t have the church directory in front of me when I wrote this sermon, so I don’t recall if we have a Simon, or Bartholomew, or Thaddeus, or Judas. But surely we have a lengthy list of substitutes we could call.

Jesus asks his followers to carry on his ministry of compassion. And he calls the present-day Church to carry it on. And here’s where the rub is for me. You see, I don’t know about you, but I found myself somewhere in that lengthy list of sometimes harassed and sometimes helpless people. We, the Church, are made up of people who are ourselves harassed and helpless in our own particular ways, and we are at the same time called to minister to others who are harassed and helpless in their own ways. To which I say, “What’s up with that?” What was Jesus thinking?! Perhaps Jesus got it wrong. Except he’s had over 2,000 years to change his mind, and so far, it seems he’s sticking with the original plan.

Ministry and mission can be hard, and lengthy, even without the complications of our own brokenness and frailty. There’s no denying that’s the way it is. It takes a long time, and more often than not we don’t get to see if our efforts make a lasting difference.

It rubs against the age that we live in - the age of the quick fix. The quick fix mentality, wrote Edwin Friedman, flies from challenge. It has a low threshold for pain, and focuses on symptom relief rather than fundamental change. It wants more than speed; it wants certainty.³ Who in the church hasn’t ever wanted certainty about our future?

I have. I like quick fixes. Take the illness that had kept me down all of last week. When my doctor finally said he thought a particular prescription might give me some relief, I couldn’t make it to the pharmacy fast enough. Given the choice between a long, drawn-out ordeal and a quick solution, I’ll take the quick fix every time.

² Alexander Wimberly, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2.

³ Edwin Friedman, *Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*.

It's no wonder it's been a long time since I've prayed for patience. By my count, it's been at least 17 years or so. I know because I remember where I was living at the time. It was either 1999 or 2000 when I made the conscious decision not to pray for patience, and I have resolutely held to that ever since. Even after four years of theological education and seven years ordained as a minister of word and sacrament, I have not broken down. Why? It's like the proverbial "be careful what you wish for." Or in this case, "be careful what you pray for." Because I fear that if I pray for it, I'll find myself facing some difficult challenge that brings with it a chance to practice the very patience I have just prayed for. So I pray for quick fixes instead.

I'd like to be able to tell you that my little scheme has been working. But it seems God's not interested in being manipulated like a puppet, or in shortcuts. It shouldn't be a surprise. For a little perspective, Edwin Friedman wrote, "Life processes evolve by taking their time. It took half a billion years for the first self-replicating life-forms, almost three billion more for the first multicellular organisms, still another half a billion for the rise of hominids, and another half a million until the appearance of our species, *Homo sapiens*. Growth, whether of a flower or of a baby, follows similar laws to this day; and growth, meaning maturation, evolves in the same way."

In the same way, there's nothing quick or easy about the mission and ministry of Christ's Church, whether from the perspective of the one who is waiting for compassion like the crowds in Jesus' day, or from the perspective of the one reaching out in compassion to serve. Wimberly wrote that when we juxtapose Jesus' accomplishments with the disciples' tasks, they seem destined to fall short. They can't go everywhere Jesus did; they won't find everyone welcoming; they won't be able to fix every ailment they find. There's hardship at every turn.⁴

Yet that didn't stop Jesus from commissioning his disciples. He called them anyway. And in spite of their shortcomings, Matthew says he gave them the authority they needed to do everything Christ called them to do. In the verses following today's reading, Jesus tells his disciples what they're going to face, and it won't always be easy. The work of discipleship and compassion can be hard. Sometimes it's costly. He didn't call superheroes. He called ordinary folks who deal with the stuff of life.

The apostle Paul put it a different way in his letter to the church at Rome: "We boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

That doesn't mean that God randomly sends suffering. It doesn't mean we're supposed to seek it. It simply speaks to the reality of life's journey. And in that journey, says Brent Laytham, "God has chosen not only to go with us, bearing us along, but also to be our very goal."⁵

A few nights ago, my husband Brad and I gathered with a few other friends for a sing-along around the piano. Several of us in the room grew up in a tradition that sang some old Gospel songs – ones I haven't sung in decades, ones with hokey tunes, hokey lyrics, even ones that seemed to have some flawed theology based on too literal interpretations of Scripture, in my opinion. They tended to have a theme like, "life on this earth is bad, really really bad, but just you wait, someday I'll make it to that mansion just over the hilltop." I was ready to feel theologically smug. And then our friend pointed out that many of these old Gospel songs that I poo-pooed were written during the Great Depression. And they were filled with hope, genuine

⁴ Wimberly, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2.

⁵ D. Brent Laytham, *Christian Century*, May 24, 2017.

hope, borne of hardship, endurance, and growth. And though I could (and do) quibble with the literalness of their claims, I realized the hope those old songs were attempting to express in spite of hardship, was the same hope in which we live and breathe.

In his book, *The Road to Character*, David Brooks wrote: “We don’t create our lives; we are summoned by life. The important answers are not found inside, they are found outside. This perspective begins not within the autonomous self, but with the concrete circumstances in which you happen to be embedded. This perspective begins with an awareness that the world existed long before you and will last long after you, and that in the brief span of your life you have been thrown by fate, by history, by chance, by evolution, or by God into a specific place with specific problems and needs. Your job is to figure certain things out: What does this environment need in order to be made whole? What is it that needs repair? What tasks are lying around waiting to be performed? As the novelist Frederick Buechner put it, “At what points do my talents and deep gladness meet the world’s deep need?”⁶

So let us go find the crowds who are harassed and helpless, in need of compassion. Let us proclaim the good news; let us bring them healing, and hope, and life. And in so doing, may we find our own.

Amen.

⁶ David Brooks, *The Road to Character*.