

Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church
Reverend Dr. Daris Bultena

July 19, 2009

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

2 Samuel 7:1-14a

¹Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, ²the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." ³Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you."

⁴But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: ⁵Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? ⁶I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. ⁷Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" ⁸Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; ⁹and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. ¹²When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. ^{14a}I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³²And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

⁵³When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. ⁵⁴When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

“Wearing Skin”

I have this geranium on my front porch. I have a love/hate relationship with it. When it is fully in bloom with its bright fuchsia blossoms it is beautiful. But something happens—after a few days there are brown leaves and the blossoms wilt. I love it when it is lush and green and beautiful, but when it gets all worn and uckie looking, then I don’t love it so much. I know why it happens too—it is because it hangs there in the south getting that hot afternoon sun, and the real problem in that is it gets really dry.

I never come and go through the front door; I always go through the garage. I do not see the fuchsia geranium until I am in my vehicle departing or arriving. It is then that I think, “Oh, I had better water that thing.” By the time I actually get in the house it seems it takes so much effort go get the water and haul it through the front door and actually put it on that poor sagging flower.

When I do, usually about three days after I should, there are amazing results. The water really does make a difference. And so does a little pinching action. I pinch off the drying blossoms and the brown leaves or yellow leaves. Instantly it looks better, and even with neglect of water it is amazing how much growth is actually there.

It is not that tough. Hauling the water. Pinching back the dead so that the new growth can come. It is not that tough. It really makes a difference. It really is good.

I can think all I want to about the beauty of that plant, but unless I apply some effort and haul the water, apply it, and pinch off the dead leaves there will be only continued decay. Life comes about for my little geranium not by remembering it is there, but by doing the physical task of attending to its minimal needs.

“Physical task.” Did you catch those words? They are significant.

In the two portions of text from Mark’s gospel today there are significant physical realities that are at play. I want us to pay attention to the physical nature of these portions of Scripture. I want us to pay attention to that physical side because I think we are so good at attending to the academic and intellectual that we often miss the physical side of our being.

If we do not miss it, then we tend to down-play our physical nature as somehow secondary to our spiritual one and our intellectual side. I somewhat blame Paul for that. Rightly or wrongly I impugn my blame on him. His Hellenistic Greek side so drew the line between that which is body and that which is intellect—he so drew a line between flesh and spirit that the one got elevated above the other. I don’t read such separateness as I read Jesus. I’m challenging that dualistic understanding because as separation between body and intellect or flesh and spirit makes it possible for us to think the great thoughts and feel the deep feelings yet at the same time loath the very bodies in which those feelings and thoughts dwell.

No. Our bodies, our flesh, our incarnation is not just a part of who we are, it is who we are. Our “personness” is found in the place where we move, and breathe, and respire, and stretch, and work, and eat, and

touch. We are incarnate. We are embodied. We are in the flesh. We are alive.

We should not deny or diminish that but appreciate it as a beautiful stroke of creation in the hand of the Holy Artist who painted the world with pulsing flesh.

As they return from being sent out—Jesus tells them to come away with him and to come apart from their work and to rest. They need a Sabbath. It is that rhythm that is written into the creation itself. Work and then rest. That rhythm is written into the fabric of the whole of creation. Six days of creation and then on the seventh day, we are told, that the great Holy Artist Painter of the world then rested.

It is commanded that there be Sabbath and that during Sabbath you shall not work—you nor your household nor your animals, etc... Our animals are our machines—our computers, and our cell phones, and our washers, and vacuum sweepers, and our televisions—there should be a day in the rhythm of our living where those animals rest so we can rest along with them.

“Come away... Come apart and rest.” Yes. Yes.

And then...they encounter the crowds. The details matter here too because they have crossed to the other side and they are in the land of the Gennesaret—call it the land of the gentiles. This is not a Jewish audience that Jesus is drawing here. Yet they come, and they come, and they keep coming. More and more and more of them—so much so that there truly are crowds of people. They want to be healed. Like that woman in another crowd there is a belief that if they even touch the fringe of his coat they will be made well.

We are told that Jesus had compassion on them. Mark puts it this way: “and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.” It is that phrase which so stands out: “and he had compassion for them.” He had compassion for them.

What is compassion?

I really think it is fascinating what Sandy McWilliams is doing. Here she is a regular person—a one of us kind of woman. She is from Louisville, KY and she is walking to her parent’s home in New Jersey in order to raise awareness about PSP. Her mom has PSP—Progressive Supranuclear Palsy. It is a terrible debilitating disease for which there is no cure. Sandy is promoting awareness in hopes of raising the bar and eventually seeking a cure. In order to raise that bar she is walking. She is walking from Louisville to New Jersey—and tomorrow, as in Monday, July, 20th, she will be walking here to Good Shepherd and she will spend the night here, and then walk through Harford County on Tuesday.

I have to tell you that I’m really impressed with her. I’m impressed with someone who feels so passionately about something that they will apply themselves in this way and actually set out to do something amazing and follow through. That is what she is doing—she said she was going to do this walk and now she is actually doing it. When I spoke with here about four days ago she had passed the 600 mile mark on her walk. By the time she gets to her mother’s house in New Jersey she will have walked over 700 miles.

Way cool! She has put her whole self into this. She is not just talking about it. She is doing it. Wow!

What is compassion? What it is not is it is not pity. Pity is something one feels from afar. One can have pity without getting their hands dirty. With pity there is a gap between the one who feels pity and the one who is pitied. Compassion is something entirely different.

“and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.”

While with pity there is a distancing between one and another, with compassion there is not. With compassion there is a coming alongside. With compassion there is a closeness, a proximity, that is the very substance of compassion itself. The literal meaning of compassion is to suffer with. To suffer with another.

“and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.”

We see that most clearly in the life of Jesus. His preaching, his teaching, his healing, his curing—that was suffering with, but he goes the full measure. Here is the Holy Incarnate One—very God of very God—who takes on the fullness of human depths and pain in the cross. To suffer with—to have compassion for us he even went to death—the sinless one takes on the result humanity’s sinfulness.

God raises him up from that—God demonstrates that such is God. God is the God of compassion who comes alongside us and raises us up.

“and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.”

We tend to hide out in our culture. We tend to burrow in and hibernate in our world. We tend to be islands to ourselves where we are careful who we let in and who we do not. We do it because we have

learned that we need to. We do it out of safety and security. We do it out of self-preservation. We do it because we have been taught so clearly.

Only the extreme narcissists haven't learned the lessons we have been taught by our culture and society. We have been taught it so well. Here's how the lesson goes: "You are not good enough. You are not smart enough. You sure are not pretty enough. You are too fat. You are too old. Your hair is too gray or too thin. Then you have gone and grown hair in the wrong place. Certain parts of your body are too large where they should be small and other parts are too small where they should be large. You just do not have what it takes."

All of it comes down to the same message: You better be quiet. You better hide out. You better, if you are going to do anything, display an exterior that looks tough and sounds tough. You better do all you can in order to get this world to bend your way.

No. No. No. You are beautiful. Women, men, boys, and girls. You are beautiful. Stand naked in front of the mirror. I don't care how fat or how wrinkly you are—stand there wearing your skin and behold—this is the wonderful creation of God. You, in who you are, in what you have—don't look at the magazines, look at you—you, in who you are, in what you have—you are this beautiful creation of God.

In that very body you feel and touch and eat and work. You do laundry, you change diapers, you scrub floors, you put together bicycles on Christmas Day, you pay taxes, and you dance instinctively when you hear those old favorite songs. It is in that fleshly existence that you are who you are. And it is good. It is the holy. It is where God meets you and where others meet God in you.

Yes, your body is the place where others meet and encounter God. It is the dwelling place of the presence of God. And so, this faith of ours is not just about thinking the great thoughts, it is not just about having a quiet prayer closet or knowing how to find the book of Nehemiah. Those are great things, but it is more than that.

This faith of ours is lived in place where we use our physical reality—it is lived in the place where we do, where we are doing. To have compassion is to suffer with. To suffer with is not a mental exercise it is a physical one. Who are you suffering with? Who are you touching? Who are you coming alongside in such a way that it is not clear if the problem is yours or theirs?

That place, oh, that very place, that is where there is God. That is where these bodies of ours are truly the Body of Christ.

Where we shed our shame and claim the beauty of our life in Christ...where we do that, really do it...where we claim the beauty of our life in Christ in our physical reality and in that place we come alongside others that is the presence of God.

Doing matters. Faithfulness is not a mental exercise or an academic assent. I remember a Sunday School definition of faith that has stuck with me though the decades that faith is “love in action.”

“Love in action.” That is what God has for us. That is what we are to have for those we encounter. This love is not a gushy or even a sexual love. It is the kind of love that is filled with compassion. “and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.”

How beautiful you are, and God knows it. How beautiful you are and if that geranium is to bloom then you will have to do. You will have to haul the water. You will have to pinch off the dead leaves so that the new life can emerge. You cannot just think about it—that will not be enough—you will have to do it. Action. Doing. Haul the water. Prune. Allow that new growth to emerge and life to shine.

There it is just beyond your front door—waiting for you, waiting for beautiful you to use your God in you to love the world in action.

“and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.”

**His compassion wears your skin! Your skin wears his compassion!
Amen.**