

The Second Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 6, Year A
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Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. [Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes."] (Matthew 9:25-10:23)

How many of you have ever had the chance to actually experience sheep without a shepherd?

Oddly enough, I have. And I'm not sure that is one of the fun facts to know and learn that Patty Duffy, our parish administrator, sent out to you before my arrival!

In my early twenties, I spent five months in the South Pacific, and a good part of that was in New Zealand. Some of you might know that New Zealand has the highest density of sheep per square foot in the world. When I was there, the ratio of sheep to humans was 20 to 1. With the rise of the dairy industry, it is now about 5 to 1. But still, that is a lot of sheep!

One day during my travels, we were driving into one of the larger cities in rush hour traffic, when suddenly the lanes ahead were lit up with brake lights and there they were - an entire flock of sheep meandering across the highway, causing a whole lot of drivers who'd been going 80 kilometers an hour to feel our hearts pounding as we tried to avoid a collision with the sheep and one another. I have no idea how those sheep - or the rest of us, for that matter, got out of it alive.

I couldn't help but think of that experience when I came across what Jesus has to say in today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew, about sheep without a shepherd, who are harassed and helpless. I couldn't help but think of those sheep in New Zealand.

I wonder now, as I wondered then, who was in charge of that particular flock that day? Where was their shepherd? And then, which of those sheep had the bright idea to stroll through rush hour traffic and lead the rest into harm's way? Where did they think they were going, anyway? There was no grass or water anywhere in sight along that highway - only a cement barrier on the other side. When was it going to occur to them to turn around and find their way back the way they had come?

As I've reflected on this over the years, I've not only realized what a miracle it was that I had avoided near disaster both in front of me from those aimless sheep, and behind me from traffic which fortunately was able to brake as well. But I have also thought about the sheep, and have felt sorry for them. For while they had probably learned to adapt to human population centers, they really were no match for car traffic during rush hour. Or any other time for that matter. And then what about their shepherd? What kind of harassment did he have to go through to locate his flock? How did he end up finding them? Through the police? The news?

I know it is a tricky thing, and not always applicable, to compare animals to humans. But Jesus did that a lot, and it's what he is doing in today's gospel when he looks out at the crowds and has compassion on them. I suspect he saw people wandering into harm's way in all sorts of ways, many (like those sheep I encountered) completely oblivious to the danger zones they were putting themselves in, and others.

He must have – he must still - look at us and wonder just what it is we are thinking when we do whatever it is we do to get ourselves in trouble. Things that are not only self-destructive, but jeopardize anyone who finds themselves careening down the highway having to brake suddenly to avoid the disasters that our distracted, or self-centered, or overwhelmed behavior can create. Perhaps Jesus finds his heart pounding, too - only not for fear for his own safety, but for ours. All of ours.

And yet, what strikes me the most when I think about this tendency of ours to act like lost sheep, is that it gets to the heart of Jesus' identity and ministry, and what he sends his disciples to go out and deal with. That is, he recognizes that at the root of all our shepherd-less wandering is that we are "harassed and helpless," and when he saw what this was doing to people, he had compassion on them.

Harassed and helpless. The power of those words to describe the crowds who surrounded Jesus is that they are so true, and not just for the people then, but for us, today. How many of you if you are given the safe space to admit it, also feel "harassed and helpless?" So overwhelmed and distracted that you find yourselves wandering headlong into all sorts of traffic jams?

I'm aware that quite a few of us are still in our parenting years, which by the way doesn't end when our children are 21, and there are times when we all feel ill-equipped for this role, at our wits end, or guilty about responding in impatience or anger. Some of us are also in the middle of big transitions, mid-life transitions, relationship transitions, job transitions. I can certainly relate to that, and have to admit, there are days that I feel more like a lost sheep than a shepherd!

Some of you are grieving, coping with the death or illness of a spouse, a family member, or a friend. Maybe your career is simply not what you'd imagined. Some of you are discovering that retirement isn't what it was cut out to be. Whatever it is we are navigating in our lives, if we take the time - and make the space - to allow ourselves to be honest, many of us do feel "harassed and helpless," but are reluctant to admit it to ourselves, let alone to others. I know I do that. But the thing is, feeling harassed and helpless is not a sign of failure but of being human! Something to be honest about, not ashamed of.

Sharing and recognizing this truth opens the door for us to hearing another important truth of today's gospel, which is that Jesus sees the people, sees us, and does have compassion. He did not come to simply teach or inspire, let alone to judge, but to live out the abundant compassion of a loving God for a harassed and hurting world - in the way he treated people, in the way he listened, and spoke and lived.

So we are given these two truths, side by side. Our need, and God's compassion. If we can be honest about the first – the truth of our needs and our shortcomings – we open ourselves to hearing and being transformed by the second – the truth about God's compassionate, loving response. If we cannot be honest, God's compassion is at best, pleasantly irrelevant ("Thanks but no thanks, God, I'm doing just fine."). And at worse, it's offensive ("Who says I need your compassion, anyway? – I've got it all together, thank you very much!").

The pressure that each of us feels these days, by our culture, in our places of work, in our social circles – *is* to have it all together, to be perfect, to have the ideal life and job and family. But all of that, I believe, is quietly crushing our Spirits. This is especially true for a generation that has grown up having to display their (supposedly perfect) lives on social media. And while the constant drive to take “selfies” and publish life updates on Facebook or Instagram may be a symptom of a narcissistic culture, it might also be a sign of deep insecurity, a relentless effort to cover up that we are, after all, as harassed and helpless as those sheep on the highway.

And so, perhaps we might all do one another a favor, and own up to truth of today’s gospel, twice. First, that we don’t actually have it all together or lead perfect lives and probably are tired of pretending we do, so that, second, we can hear that Jesus didn’t come for perfect people, that the church has never been made up of perfect people, and that it’s okay – in fact it’s incredibly helpful to admit we all can feel harassed and helpless.

That is why God became human in the first place and continues to come to us through each other, in acts of kindness and patience, honesty and sometimes, tough love, which might mean - to use another of Jesus’ animal metaphors - being wise as serpents and gentle as doves.

It is this kind of honesty that I have already begun to experience here, at St. John’s, and it is something that I hope we can continue to embrace and encourage in one another. Because it’s through a flock such as ours that we are given a chance in life to learn to be loved, not for the people we are trying to be or have promised to be or want to be, but the ones we are. Wandering sheep, concerned shepherds, children of God, one and all.

Amen