

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller
The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
19 July 2015

Scripture readings:

2nd Samuel 7:1-14a

Psalm 89:20-37

Ephesians 2:11-22

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

It has been suggested that there are places that are holy places, places that are refuges for those who go to seek God's presence, to speak with God, and places that are distinguished from the rest of the world as sacred rather than profane. And if you ruffle through the pages of *The Book of Common Prayer* you will see services for the dedication of church buildings and services for the desecration of buildings that are no longer used as churches. They go back to being profane places.

I'm not convinced by what we read in 2nd Samuel that the Almighty really is going to be happy with a house, a location, a temple in Jerusalem - the wall of which still stands and where we can go and meet God and slip our little prayers in cracks between the stones and forget perhaps that holiness in this life and in this world and the holiness we encounter as we read scripture has much more to do with God housing himself with and among people and in human interaction.

And then we encounter the story in the gospel of Jesus and the twelve trying to escape human interaction. They're tired. They need a retreat. They need a vacation. They need to get away. They have been busy. They want to be by themselves.

You may or may not know it about this diocese, but there's an annual clergy retreat which I sometimes attend. Honestly, in the past I attended only because I *had* to and haven't always found that the most constructive thing in the world for me and the way I operate.

But here's Jesus himself wanting to withdraw, and it's not going to happen. They see him get in the boat. They jump into a taxi and say, "*Follow that car!*" and wherever he goes they're there before he gets out of the boat. He gets to one crowd and then he goes and gets to the next crowd, and they simply will not leave them alone. No matter what *their* needs are, the needs of the people seem to take precedence. Now there is more than one way of responding to that situation. One could be: the Lord with all of his power and connection could simply say, "*Will you please leave me alone for a day... a week... forty days.*" That's not what happens. Despite their need - the apostles and Jesus - when the crowds come, Jesus looks at them and as the gospel lesson this morning, as the writer of St. Mark says, "*he had compassion for them.*" Why? Because they were like sheep without a shepherd. They needed something. We could read this as they needed ecclesiastical leadership. That's nice for our kind because it keeps us in a job. *[laughter]*

Was it last week we read, "*Beware of those who lead the sheep astray.*" We could read that as a suggestion about the priesthood of religious leadership. We could also read it as they just need guidance. They need to know where they are going. They need God in their lives. They need to know that God is present. And they have followed Jesus not toward a synagogue, not toward a temple, not toward a church, but they have followed Jesus and his disciples to be in his presence wherever he was and wherever they were. And what did they need? What did they want? "*And wherever he went into the villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him - now get this - **begged** him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.*"

Now that sounds like magic, doesn't it? Boy, if I could only touch the shroud of Turin, think what that would do for me!

We look for healing in a variety of ways, but there is this acknowledgment in scripture that being in the presence of and being able to touch Jesus was somehow really curative, was helpful. Well, I think our religion is a pitiful and sad thing if our belief that being in the presence of and being able to touch Jesus ended two thousand years ago when he was

crucified and then he got forty extra days or fifty until he ascended and then Jesus was no longer able to be seen or touched. The subsequent two thousand years of us people who have lived on the earth since his death are of all people most cheated because we didn't get that chance to have our mats and our sick laid at his feet within reach of the hem of his garment. Well, I think that's a dangerous kind of religious stuff we do particularly when we start to build buildings and say that is where God lives rather than re-evaluate and re-appreciate the confession that St. Paul and the Church make subsequently - that we, in fact, as members of the baptized priesthood of all believers, constitute the living body of Christ in the world today, that you and I together formulate Christ's flesh and blood body here and now. I think sometimes we forget that there is a world teeming around us deserving of our compassion, the compassion that Jesus shared with those who came to him, because the world needs a shepherd and we've got one! And it may be our job to share that shepherd with the world.

Now often that inspires in people a very vigorous missionary attitude which means I go to a foreign country where people don't speak the language I speak. Why don't they? Well, it may be that I'm in *their* country. That sometimes occurs to us. I've told you the story of the German woman in the kitchen in my first parish which was still speaking German when I was ordained in 1975. They also continued to worship in German in a neighborhood that was 90+ percent Hispanic. And the question was asked very unaffectionately, I'm sure, one Sunday between masses: "*Why don't they learn to spick Inklisch the vay vee dit?*" The point is the Christian attitude is to look at those who come with compassion. This is what Jesus did with those who came to touch the savior with compassion because as foreigners, aliens, travelers, people who have no sanctuary, no temple, no house in which their God lives, come to see and touch a living God, and what do they see and touch when they see and come in contact with us? "*Why don't they learn to spick Inklisch the vay vee dit?*"

Or there is an option: "*We had to learn English too and it took us time. And we immigrated here too and it took time and it was hard for us. How can we make it easier for you?*"

Now Jesus was tired and so were the twelve, and they had a good reason to be on vacation. In fact, the lake they talked about in Mark this morning - I happen to know on good authority - was Lake Wallenpaupack. [*laughter*] or any other lake in the world. We know about going on vacation. I know intimately about retiring. But apparently the sense that Jesus and the twelve get from those who are in need - it does not come from within them; it comes from those who are in need who come to them - the sense that they get is their need changes our behavior. "*I'm sorry. We're on our way out of here.*" They gather around and say, "*May I touch your garment?*" And instead of saying "*No*" Jesus takes the time to touch and heal and allow himself to be touched.

I firmly believe that the early Church in this story may be indicating that Jesus himself and the twelve were significantly changed by their encounter with the poor and the needy. And is it possible for us today to believe that even in this day in the 20th century? Even the pope in Rome is saying to the Church and the world: pay attention to the poor and the needy. They will change us, the Church, and by owning our identity as the body of Christ what they need from us may be a shepherd whom we have who is eternal, universal and God himself. What they need is a shepherd and what they come to get we can provide - which is compassion and a compassionate touch.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.