

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost 18 July 2021

Jeremiah 23:1-6 / Psalm 23 / Ephesians 2:11-22 / Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Isn't it amazing, we're already more than halfway through the month of July. Have any of you had vacation time yet? That's great! And it sounds like, from the gospel reading we just heard, that Jesus would be glad for you, too.

In the last couple of weeks we've heard about how Jesus healed people, how he wasn't so well-received in his hometown, and he sent the disciples out into the world to do some preaching and healing themselves. And we heard the sad story of how Jesus' cousin John the Baptist was ordered killed by Herod, John who proclaimed Jesus' coming and had gathered disciples himself in the process.

Today Jesus' disciples are back, and when they tell him all they've done out on the road, he invites them to rest. So I imagine Jesus might well be glad that we also take some time to rest and recharge our batteries after we've been working hard in our lives.

Then the focus of today's gospel reading moves away from rest, and lands on compassion. Maybe you noticed how, after Jesus suggests that the disciples get some rest,

that they don't get the opportunity? Instead, Jesus and the disciples respond to the needs of the crowds coming to them. Jesus puts the self-care plan on hold and goes out to the people, teaching, preaching, and opening up to them the possibility of life in God's kingdom.

And Jesus uses a time-honored comparison, that the people were like sheep who needed a shepherd, and so he responded to them in compassion for their need. Like a shepherd.

It's an image many of us may have seen. There's plenty of religious art that shows Jesus as a shepherd, sometimes even carrying a lamb in his arms or with a sheep draped across his shoulders. We had a living image of Jesus the shepherd as Carter Nicholas joined the community of faith and had his own lamb to hold as well!

And it may be a familiar phrase because it comes up a lot in Scripture. As Christians the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, can help us understand the New Testament. When the evangelists wrote the four gospels, they were writing for people who would know those Hebrew scriptures too.

The expression "sheep without a shepherd" is used in scenes where God stands against abusive shepherds who don't care about the sheep; even Moses uses the expression.

Today in our first reading the prophet Jeremiah talks about the shepherds, or rulers, who

destroy, rather than take care of their flocks. And God promises to raise up good shepherds, that a just king will come, a righteous Branch from the house of David.

Today's gospel reading is what's called a bridge reading, coming between times we've seen Jesus heal and feed people, and times he'll do so again. Today Jesus, that very same righteous Branch foretold long ago, sees the needs of the crowds following him, these sheep without a shepherd, and responds in compassion.

The two words go together: compassion and need. And it may make us wonder: what is it each of us needs in order to feel whole, to lead fulfilled lives, to be happy, to feel like we make a difference in the world?

Because when we hear about Jesus' compassion and his commitment to meeting peoples' needs, we may want to think about how Saint Andrew's is, and how it can be committed to meeting the needs of those around us.

Let's remember how Jesus responds to our needs in compassionate love – it might not be through cures or feeding, depending on the need. And the same way Jesus responds to the crowds following him, he responds to us gathering in our congregations today.

So again, what is it we need to flourish and be the people God has called us to be? To be at worship not out of a sense of duty or obligation, but a sense of delight and anticipation?

We see in today's gospel how some needs are clear: people who are sick want to be healed, and those who are hungry want to be fed. Those needs exist here in our own congregation, and throughout our community. Saint Andrew's can and does play an active role in meeting concrete needs. Even today there are 26 pounds of food in the parish office kitchen going across the street to the Food Pantry as a result of last month's blood drive.

Then there are less tangible needs. What would we change in order to get those desired elements into our lives? We often already have more than we might imagine, and that confusion may even contribute to our problems. It can be hard to make time and space for what we need if we're spending our energy chasing false "wants" nurtured by our consumer-based culture.

How can our church help people lead more abundant lives? Not just happy lives or with purpose, but also lives that include justice and peace and community? In Saint Mark's gospel, Jesus calls this the kingdom of God; in John's gospel he often describes it as

abundant life. But no matter what you call it, it's what we all want. We all sense that something more is out there for us, and we'd all like some help living into the kingdom world of abundant life offered by Jesus Christ.

For once we are caught up in the reality of Jesus' compassion and love, then we can look around and respond to the needs of those around us with like measures of compassion and love.

We know the needs are great. The crowds are still gathering, like sheep without a shepherd, and many people need to hear the good news. Christ responds to our needs as well. We are called only after Christ sees us, attends to us, and heals us, so that we go forth and find him in the needs of those people we serve. That is the *imago dei*, the face of God: we come together, nourished in word and sacrament, and then leave this church to find the face of Christ in those who we serve.

This summer may be our time to think about what the people of Saint Andrew's need to flourish as God's children, as individuals, households, and community. We know it can be challenging to keep our ministries fresh and working together rather than as separate, perhaps sometimes competing roles. Let's ask ourselves what we can contribute, and how the church can support us in moving in that direction together? It takes both the question

about what individuals have to contribute, and what we can do together as a community of faith here in Smithtown.

Each of us is a member of the flock. We lay our sickness and suffering, our deepest inner needs, at Jesus' feet, knowing here is the promised shepherd bringing something new and beautiful. In today's story the people can see it and feel it in the compassion that Jesus shows toward them. Once like sheep without a shepherd, now they feel the tender love of Jesus. *We* felt it as we welcomed Carter Nicholas into the Body of Christ this morning.

And by the Good Shepherd's presence among us, we know that "surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives."

And so to him, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.