

“People Still Reach Out to Touch the Fringe”
+ 8 Pentecost B +
Jeremiah 23:1-6; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34,53-56
July 19, 2015

As I mentioned in the announcements Ben Wegner’s parents made him take a vacation with the family this weekend. It’s that time of year - It’s “Summer Time And The Living Is Easy,” according to George Gershwin in his folk opera “Porgy and Bess,” though I’m not so sure everyone here would agree with that dealing with summer projects that are taking oh-so-much time making “easy living” elusive with so much to do in so little time. And even though it isn’t winter the weather outside has been frightful – ask Lisa Kunz who had a tree come down on her house from straight line winds!

Jesus and His disciples weathered more than one storm but they didn’t have to worry about things like mowing lawns, painting houses, putting in a patio, rebuilding a bathroom or squeezing in time to go “Up North” (that’s a joke because, you see, Galilee was “Up North” and that’s where the Gospel finds them). But wouldn’t it be nice with whatever work it is you have to do – a change in your life, a loss to work through, a day to day routine that doesn’t let up to be like the disciples and have Jesus invite you to “take a break” to “come away to a deserted place and rest a while?”

Wonderful - but as the Gospel continues, we discover their little getaway didn’t happen; it’s like your boss calling you back into work just when you thought you’d made a successful escape; emails and text messages that find us wherever we are and hinder our own attempts at getting away from it all or even from just a small part of “all.”

All the disciples wanted was a little time to share what had happened to them when Jesus sent them out to spread the Good News of the Kingdom - like excited school kids, they are gathered around Jesus eager to share their adventures with Him and with one other. After 40 years of teaching I’m figuring Jesus, the Master Teacher could read in their faces how anxious they were to share and how worn out they were - due for a vacation – not just from the work they’d done but living with Jesus meant so many people were constantly coming and going that, “they had no leisure even to eat.” In their culture it was rude to turn away a visitor but imagine having crowds flooding into your home, all of them wanting something from your resident

teacher - Jesus. With their headquarters at Capernaum or even when they were at Mary, Martha & Lazarus' home, having Jesus as a guest meant you were inviting crowds!

Now, Jesus had given His disciples “authority” to cast out demons and to heal the sick so the crowds were increasing - those visitors/strangers/guests/curiosity seekers were coming and going because they thought they had hit the jackpot with 12 or 13 healers right in their midst. Oh, being at Capernaum on the shore of the Sea of Galilee they could have escaped by boat but here's another detail – a regrettable detail: the sea of Galilee is surrounded by hills and small mountains so that it only required a short climb to see where the boat was headed, which is how those crowds figured out where Jesus was headed next and ran ahead on foot to get there ahead of him. I read once that the distance the crowd went was about 10 miles, which either indicates the impressive athleticism of those impoverished, and ill-fed people, or more likely, their desperation for someone to help them and heal them.

And when He arrived, Mark tells us that Jesus “had compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” Compassion—what a wonderful word! Not pity like the prosperous might have for the poor or the healthy for the sick. Not “holier than thou” because in those days poverty and sickness were thought to be indicators of God's displeasure making it therefore, ungodly for the godly to intervene because those people had gotten what they deserved (not that we ever think of things that way...).

But compassion: it means to “suffer with” someone, to own their pain, to feel their desperation as deeply as though it were your own. The world could use a lot more compassion as the statistics tell us the rich are getting richer and the poor are in ever more desperate need, millions around the world are starving – some, literally to death, others drowning as they attempt to cross oceans and seas in overcrowded boats simply to reach the shore of a country that will give them a future and a hope.

Compassion – it is a godly trait that cannot be taught; it can only be learned through suffering. None of us likes to suffer, but if we did not from time to time, you and I would never know how to feel not for the hungry but with the hungry; not for the powerless, shoved aside to the fringes of society, but with the powerless. And we would never have a clue how to follow a compassionate Christ as He (and we) walk through this troubled world.

Jesus points out to us in this Gospel that people need a shepherd, not just a good shepherd but The Good Shepherd – they need Jesus – and they need you to be “Jesus with skin on.” People need a place to come and find rest – here in this sanctuary God has given for worship is a great place...but so many people are afraid to come through the doors of a church - they need people to go to them, to walk with them. Not to lay guilt on you – I see this kind of compassion in the people of Jehovah. I’ve known your compassion in my own life but this scrap of scripture with worn out disciples in need of a break who are so eager to get away only to find more need, well, it leaves them and us straddling the reality of guilt on one side and grace on the other as saints and as sinners. That’s why God gave us Jesus The Good Shepherd who understands us when we are sheepish and loves and leads us with all our faults and flaws, forgives us and who summons us to “come away” and find our rest in Him.

That’s what worship is all about: not about getting our marching orders for the week ahead; not to get a spiritual spanking for what we have screwed up in the week behind, but just to come away and spend some time in the company of our fellow sheep and our compassionate shepherd.

Well, that’s about half of the Gospel this morning and we’re not going to get through it all but go down to the very last sentence where Mark mentions that people were brought to Jesus so that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak and all who touched it were healed.

Here’s another factoid from my warehouse of facts: this fringe is not a hem or a dragging thread. Every Jewish man had a cloak or a mantle/shawl that they put on their heads when they prayed and on that shawl were four fringes, never more, never less. It’s like those fringes were a symbol of a prayer connection with God. That’s why people were grabbing for the fringes of Jesus’s cloak.

And it occurred to me that you and me, we’re like those fringes in the world today; not because we are always piously praying on our knees and not because we have a connection with Jesus more special, more intimate than any other. But simply this, people are still reaching out to touch the fringe of Jesus for forgiveness and the touch of the Divine that can change their eternity - by our words, by our deeds, by our actions and our attitudes of kindness and

compassion, we are the fringes by which people can reach out for Jesus and be touched and healed. Amen.

Now may our powerful and compassionate God, faithfully shepherding His people heal us by His grace and make us whole and healthy in Him.