

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
June 18, 2023 – The Third Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 9:35-10:16
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

I'm sure I'm not the only person here who enjoys reading British murder mysteries. Recently I have been reading the stories of P.D. James, most recently "The Skull Beneath the Skin." As in all her stories, this one has a complicated plot. At one point there is a Sunday service for a small group of guests/suspects that takes place in the ancient chapel of a castle on a remote island. A very old and liturgically traditional priest is brought to the island to lead Morning Prayer and preach. P.D. James writes, "The sermon lasted fifteen minutes and was a learned dissertation on the Pauline theology of the redemption." When the sermon was over, one character whispers sardonically to another, "That's all one asks of a sermon. No possible relevance to anything but itself." I hope you won't find that to be true today! Our reading from Matthew's Gospel should be very relevant to our lives as followers of Jesus.

Jesus had been traveling from place to place, teaching, preaching, and healing people. At this point Jesus is about to begin a new phase of his ministry – sending out his disciples to share in his mission, to do what he is doing. And at this moment in his ministry Jesus views the crowds of people gathered around him with compassion because he sees them in a particular way, "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." This image of sheep and shepherd is found often in the Old Testament, especially in passages in which God promises to be the shepherd of God's people, taking care of them, guiding them, healing, and strengthening them (see Ezekiel and Psalm 23).

Jesus is the Good Shepherd of his people. He has been given authority by God, and now he gives authority to his disciples, authority to cast out evil and to heal – authority in the service of compassion. The followers of Jesus are meant to be attentive to the suffering of God's people and to have compassion which leads to action to relieve that suffering. This is the mission that has been given to us as well. Our world is in some ways very different from Jesus' world, but human vulnerability and suffering are not.

After describing the crowds as sheep without a shepherd, Jesus shifts to a new image. He sees the people as a field nearing the harvest and needing farm laborers. There is an urgency in this image. When crops are ready to be harvested, there is no time to waste, or the harvest will be lost. He says 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." Jesus asks his disciples to pray for laborers and then he gives them instructions about how to be his ambassadors, practicing the ministry of compassion that he teaches and practices. In effect, the disciples are to be the answer to their own prayers.

Many years ago, the rector of the church I attended at the time told a story about his young daughter, Grace. She was in grade school, and in the middle of the year a new girl joined her class. Grace noticed that in the lunchroom the girl was sitting alone while all the other girls were sitting together in their established groups. Grace told her father that the girl looked sad and lonely, so she prayed that God would help her. Her father asked Grace what happened. She said that she had waited for a few minutes, but God didn't seem to be doing anything, so she went over and talked to the lonely girl herself. In the language of mission, of course, God was doing something – God was sending Grace to do God's work.

Before going on, I want to address one verse of our lesson that may be troubling to you. Jesus tells his disciples: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” We should interpret this instruction to mean that the disciples should go first to the people of Israel, not exclusively to the people of Israel. Remember that Matthew’s Gospel has many references to non-Jews, to Gentiles. The three Wise Men from the East. The Roman centurion who asks Jesus to heal his servant. The Canaanite woman who begs Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. All these are examples of Gentiles who have great faith. And finally, we have the end of Matthew’s Gospel, the Great Commission, when the risen Christ tells the disciples to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19).

In several Anglican Churches, including the Episcopal Church, this past Thursday Evelyn Underhill was honored. She was a British laywoman in the Church of England, who lived from 1875 to 1941. Underhill was very interested in the study of Christian mystical experience and spiritual development. She wrote a number of books, both scholarly and popular, and she was well-known as a spiritual director and retreat leader as well as a writer.

Evelyn Underhill saw the mystic as a person who desires to be ever closer to God. Being a mystic is an option for everyone, not just for a few people in every age who live apart from the world and focus exclusively on prayer and study. All of us can be seekers and lovers of God. She also believed strongly that being a mystic involves action. As she put it, “the spiritual life of individuals has to be extended both vertically to God and horizontally to other souls.” Think of the shape of the cross, especially a cross like the one on the front of your service leaflets: the arms of the cross reach both upward and outward in equal measure. Underhill rejected the definition of the spiritual life as “the life of my own inside,” a definition that characterizes some people today who see themselves as “spiritual but not religious.”

I would commend to you a short book called “The Spiritual Life.” It is a series of four radio broadcasts which Underhill gave in 1936. I find the talk entitled “The Spiritual Life as Co-operation with God” especially compelling. I would like to share part of it with you. Referring to the Lord’s Prayer, she writes, “It is useless to utter fervent petitions for that Kingdom to be established and that Will be done, unless we are willing to do something about it ourselves.... We are the agents of the Creative Spirit [the Holy Spirit] in this world. Real advance in the spiritual life, then, means accepting this vocation with all it involves.... To say day by day ‘Thy Kingdom Come’ – if these tremendous words really stand for a conviction and desire – does not mean ‘I quite hope that some day the Kingdom of God will be established and peace and goodwill prevail. But at present I don’t see how it is to be managed or what I can do about it.’ On the contrary, it means, or should mean, ‘Here am I! Send me!’ – active, costly collaboration with the Spirit in whom we believe” (pages 77-83).

Underhill writes very much in the spirit of today’s lesson from Matthew’s Gospel. Those of us who love God and seek to follow Jesus are called to do the healing work that Jesus did, to feel compassion and to take compassionate action. For some time, it has been popular for people to speak of their “passion” in life – “my passion is photography” or “my passion is quilting.” What if we asked ourselves instead, “what is my compassion?” “Where does my compassionate heart lead me to act?” We can, of course, only do what we have the capacity to do, and that changes over the course of our lives. But as we seek to do God’s will, let us remember these words from our final hymn: “Come, labor on, away with gloomy doubts and faithless fear! No arm so weak but may do service here: by feeblest agents may our God fulfill his righteous will.” And, in faith, may we say “yes” to God’s call, for the love of Christ and for the love of God’s people and God’s world. Amen.