

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
June 14, 2026 – 3 Pentecost
Matthew 9:35-10:8
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

In this morning's Gospel lesson, we are reminded that for some time Jesus has 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. Jesus 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 to be attentive to the suffering of God's people, to have compassion, and to act to relieve that suffering. This is the mission that has been given to us as well. Our world is in many ways very different from Jesus' world, but human vulnerability and suffering are not.

You may be familiar with the term “transactional relationship.” This term describes a connection between people where interactions are based on exchanges of benefits. A transactional relationship functions like a trade – where people engage with each other primarily for personal gain rather than for mutual care or affection. You may have learned from childhood on that rewards come from performance. Indeed, this is the way of the world in our culture and in many others. Work hard and you will succeed in life – in your career, financially, socially, in many ways. The premise is that we earn what is valuable in life by our efforts.

Neither of these descriptions of human relationships and human endeavor describe our relationship with God. We cannot “earn” God's love or our salvation. Our relationship with God is not transactional in that way. For one thing – very obviously, we are not “equal partners” with God. We are not in a position to give “this for that” with God. It's absurd to think so. However, it is a temptation that has appeared in various forms throughout the history of Christianity to try to “earn” salvation. For example, through good works, through religious piety, through self-denial, even to the point of self-harm, such as excessive fasting and sleep deprivation. We often find it very difficult to separate the ways of God from the ways of the world.

What Jesus' teaching, life, and ministry tell us is that our relationship with God is one of love initiated by God. As we read in the First Letter of John (4:19): “We love God because God first loved us.” Our right response to God is love for love. Not counting the cost to us (though we may honestly acknowledge what that cost is) and not expecting that “virtue” will be rewarded by God with a life that has many blessings and minimal suffering. Spiritual writers have pointed out that the opposite may be case. St. Teresa of Avila is reported to have addressed Jesus at a particularly challenging moment in her travels to reform the Carmelite order, “Jesus, if this is how you treat your friends, it is no wonder you have so few!” Whether or not this is a factual account, it describes a recurring phenomenon of Christian life.

At the end of this morning's passage there is a very important sentence: “You received without payment; give without payment.” Many Bible translations read: “Freely you have received, freely give.” The Message translation is: “You have been treated generously, so live generously.” Another recent translation reads: “You received these gifts freely, so you should give them to others freely” (The Voice Bible). The “transactional relationship,” if we may call it that, which we have with God is not that we give to God and God gives to us, or that God gives to us and we give to God, but that God gives to us and we give to others. On the last night of his life Jesus said to his closest friends, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34). God first loves us. Jesus loves us. We respond by loving God, by

loving Jesus. And we have the privilege of demonstrating our love of God, our love of Jesus by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

On most Sundays of the church year our worship service includes a Confession of Sin. We acknowledge to God that “we have not loved you with our whole heart; and we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.” Our “sin” is a failure to love as we have been loved and as we have been commanded to love. The church gives the authority to priests and bishops to pronounce to the people God’s absolution or forgiveness of sin. We ask that through Jesus Christ God will restore our relationship of love with God and will strengthen the goodness in our lives which is the result of that restored relationship with God. These final words of The Absolution are important: “by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life.” We ask God the Holy Spirit to keep us in the loving relationship with God that by God’s mercy has been restored. Eternal life is now – as well as beyond our lives on earth – because eternal life is to be in a relationship of love for love, a relationship of trust, with Jesus and with God the Holy Trinity. “Eternal life” is not a reward we earn in a transactional relationship.

In several Anglican Churches, including the Episcopal Church, tomorrow Evelyn Underhill will be 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 several books, both scholarly and popular, and 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. The arms of the cross reach both upward and outward.

Underhill wrote a series of four radio broadcasts given in 1936 that are collected in a short book called “The Spiritual Life.” I find the talk entitled “The Spiritual Life as Co-operation with God” especially compelling. 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 Gospel lesson. 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. People today 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.