

July 21, 2024  
Proper 11B  
Grace Church, Muncie  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Jeremiah 23:1-6*

*Psalms 23*

*Ephesians 2:11-22*

*Mark 6:30-34, 53-56*

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I don't know if you noticed, but today's gospel reading has a hole in it. Verses 35-52 seem to have vanished. At first glance, this seems odd. We wonder, who did that? What did they take out, and why? I will admit that in previous years I have spent a lot of time worrying about these questions, fretting about what's missing. But, more and more of late, I've decided to spend my energy on what's actually in front of me, rather than on what's not. (Probably a good life lesson in general.)

I wonder if this gap might serve as an entry point for us today. We've become used to Mark's rapid narrative pace, where things happen immediately. Perhaps the frantic pace of Mark's gospel sometimes distracts us from the larger picture of God's action in Christ among us...among all of us. Maybe today's gospel hole will allow us to peer into that space to see something new. Let's look...

We have crowds of folks rushing to see Jesus and the apostles wherever they go around the northern edges of the Sea of Galilee. Occasionally, the crowd arrives ahead of them. Sometimes Mark takes us to the Samaritan side, sometimes the Gentile side, sometimes the Jewish side. Jesus' presence and ministry on all sides is precisely the point Mark is making.

And what are all these people searching for? They yearn to be fed and healed, to be sure. They also long for a sense of identity and place. They ache to be seen, to be recognized, to be loved by God. And in all of these hungers, and more, they and we are the same.

In the seventeenth century, the French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote about these human hungers.

What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in people a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This they try in vain to fill with everything around them, seeking in things that are not there the help they cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this

infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object;  
in other words by God himself.<sup>1</sup>

Pascal suggests that you and I have a God-shaped hole in us. A hole that we are always trying to fill with all manner of things that we think will satisfy our needs. All manner of things which, in the end, fall short.

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As Jesus went ashore, *he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.* Jesus had compassion for them. This is the second time today we hear this word. The first was in the Collect, when we prayed to God to have compassion on our weakness.

Compassion is a word we hear a lot, usually in the sense of pity or sympathy. Although we might talk about our heart strings getting tugged, compassion is mostly a mental activity for us – something like “thoughts and prayers.”

But our faith is not simply a faith of ideas; Christianity is not a faith from the neck up. The Incarnation is a full-body, physical thing. The same is true of compassion.

When Mark says that Jesus *had compassion for them* (6:34), he uses a Greek figure of speech meaning, “to be moved in his inner parts.”<sup>2</sup> When Jesus saw the crowds, he felt it in his gut.

So, you see, what’s happening in Mark’s gospel is, on the one hand, the people (and you and I) are running to meet Jesus, looking to fill that hole in our individual and collective sides. And, on the other hand, there is Jesus, having compassion, being compassion, experiencing our deepest needs – not in his head, or in what we call the heart, but at the deepest, most inward level, in his gut.

Out of compassion, God longs to feed us every bit as much we hunger to be fed – and yet, still more. Remember again the words of the Collect: *mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask.* More than we can ask or imagine.

This relationship works almost like a magnetic force. We are constantly drawn to something – sometimes it is God, sometimes it is not – to fill that aching chasm in our innermost being. At the same time, there is the overwhelming persistence of God’s compassion, of God’s gut, of God calling us “again and again” to be made whole, and at

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<sup>1</sup>Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), *Pensées*.

<sup>2</sup> Strong’s Concordance, 4697. *Splagchnizomai*, formed from *splagchnon*, a strengthening of *splen* (spleen).

one with God. I like to imagine that God has an “us-” shaped hole, a “you & me-” shaped hole that only you and I can fill.

Let’s extend the magnetic metaphor just a bit further. In calling us into communion with God, Jesus draws us, all of us, into community with each other. This is that larger picture of God’s action in Christ among us: to call us together to form the household of God, of which Christ Jesus the Compassionate, is the chief cornerstone.

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Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians is perfectly clear on this. We sing a hymn that goes: *In Christ there is no East or West, in Him no South or North, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.*

“No” and “whole” are absolute terms, they cannot be modified or diminished. God calls those who are far off and those who are near, from every side of the lake, to break down walls and to proclaim peace. Given the headlines these days, this sounds like a head-in-the-sand, Pollyannish response.

With the world shrinking before our very eyes, with instantaneous global communication, we seem more fragmented and tribal than ever. Culture warriors of every stripe and party continue to cry out for more division, for building more walls of all sorts to protect themselves from those they see as different, blocking any ability to see our similarities.

And still, we say that we desire peace. We might imagine that the universal desire for peace is another way of talking about that God-shaped hole we all have. Nevertheless, peace continues to elude us. Conflicts rage on between us and within us.

Peace, my friends, is not simply the absence of strife. Peace is not when everybody else finally agrees with us. For us, God’s peace is the presence of Christ, who is our peace (Eph 2:14).

In 2010, Br. David Vryhof, SSJE, spoke about peace on his podcast.

God’s peace is not achieved by the strong dominating the weak; such domination may bring a temporary end to conflict and war, but it will not bring about true peace. The kingdom of God is a peaceable kingdom, a transformed society in which each member is valued and treated with dignity. The weak and the strong live together in harmony, each caring for the other. There is no true peace without justice.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ssje.org/2010/11/28/longing-for-the-peace-of-christ-br-david-vryhof/>

The good news for today is that the church, THIS church, can model and live into the barrier-free life of peace that God has *already* given to us in Christ. If you want to take God's compassionate call to you seriously, this congregation can become an even brighter beacon of Christ and Christ's peace in the world. Follow the example of St. Francis and pray to become an instrument of God's peace.

If you're faithful to your search for God and careful in listening for God's voice to you; if you look deeply into the world around you: in your home, in this church family, and then in the concentric circles of, Muncie, Delaware County, East Central Indiana, and on and on... you will, with God's help, fulfil your baptismal promise to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

To be faithful to this call means that you have to dig deeper than superficial anger and fear, deeper even than thoughts and prayers. Because, if you look deeply into the world, with the eyes of your heart, you will see where God is calling you to have compassion, to be compassion, for others in the world ... in your gut.

Will we always get it right? Goodness me, no! But even in our struggles to fill the God-shaped hole in us, despite our disagreements and our outright failures, remember that Jesus, who has compassion on us and who is our peace, is also our cornerstone.

And it is on that cornerstone that God promises to build the new temple that is no building at all. Christ is the solid cornerstone, the apostles and prophets are the foundation, and the Holy Spirit binds all the parts together. But the stones of that new temple are fragile and fallible – because those stones are the likes of us.

Just picture it. Through the tender compassion that God has for us in God's own gut, you and I, and all creation will be joined together and grown ... into a dwelling place of God!

May it be so for us. Amen.