

Second Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A)  
Exodus 19:2-8a; Psalm 100; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8  
June 13-14, 2020  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I'd always assumed that primitive peoples abandoned the handicapped and quickly dispatched the seriously injured. After all, we hear stories about unwanted babies being left on exposed hillsides in Roman times. But then I read an article in the science section of the paper, years ago. I learned that in Vietnam archaeologists discovered a 4,000 year old burial site that includes the remains of a late teen or early 20-something person known impersonally as "Burial 9." The skeleton is curled into a fetal position, whereas all the others are arranged straight as an arrow. Multiple vertebrae are fused together in Burial 9's spine and all the bones are quite weak, leading to the conclusion that because of a congenital disease he became a paraplegic, unable to walk, by the time he reached adolescence. Forensic evidence also shows he had little or no use of his arms, so he would have been totally unable to feed or care for himself. However, he lived another 10 years, certainly proving that his community cared for him so well that he neither withered from lack of nutrition nor lack of love. The archaeologists conclude he had a will to live, he maintained a sense of self-worth, despite his difficult circumstances. He was so tenderly cared for he knew he was valued and he embraced the gift of life.

We're talking Stone Age here. The community we're talking about didn't have metal tools. They lived by fishing, hunting, "raising barely domesticated pigs,"<sup>1</sup> and they invested time in this teenager who couldn't **help** with any of that work and who **made** work because he needed to be fed, clothed, cleaned. The article is entitled: "Ancient Bones That Tell a Story of **Compassion.**"

In response to COVID-19, the NY City subway system closed down for daily cleaning from 1-5 a.m., beginning on May 6, the first such closure in the last 115 years. This created yet another crisis for the over 2,000 homeless people who were catching a few Z's riding trains all night rather than sleeping vulnerably in doorways, on sidewalks, on park benches. One spokesperson for that group put it simply: "We don't **have** homes to go home to." Clearly there's a problem with any society that has that many people choosing to spend their nights in motion because they have no stable or safe place to lay down their heads. **Compassion** has come into play, though, to some extent. Rather than just evicting the homeless from train cars, MTA police have been trained to ask what help they can give, and nurses have been available to tend to the sick or injured. The MTA also provides transportation to hospitals or psychiatric units as needed, and staff direct those who are willing to shelters, crowded and sometimes dangerous though they be.

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:36)*

Jesus majored in **compassion**. Not so long before the scene described in today's Gospel, Jesus healed a whole array of people, including the daughter of the leader of the synagogue, the woman with the hemorrhage, blind men, and a fellow who couldn't speak because he was demon-possessed. Jesus felt people's pain and did something about it. The words sympathy and compassion both literally mean "to suffer with." But someone has explained the difference this way:

"Sympathy sees and says, 'I'm sorry.'  
Compassion feels and whispers, 'I'll help.'"

Jesus was always ready to help, not just shed a tear. And He deputized His disciples to do the same!

*... Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.*  
(Matthew 10:1)

Just last week we heard our Lord say, *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”* (Matthew 28:18b) He has power to give us power and He chooses to do just that. What our Lord commands He empowers. He’s not going to tell us to do something He knows we’re incapable of. We just have to hear His call and trust His word.

Jesus also tells His friends to *“proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’”* (Matthew 10:7) **We’re** supposed to be doing that, too! But no one is going to believe any good news we spout, no one is going to be convinced that God is alive and well, that God cares so much God sent the Son, that God is willing to forgive and is powerful to save, unless we embody God’s love and at least attempt to ease their suffering.

Truth in advertising: being compassionate always involves **doing something**, and **doing something** (acting in love) is not without its risks. Jesus paid the price. All of His apostles died a martyr’s death, except Judas and the beloved disciple. But listen to this story told by Henri Nouwen, a great 20<sup>th</sup> century man of faith, spiritual writer, friend of Jesus. There was an old man sitting on the banks of the Ganges River in India, doing his morning meditation. When he opened his eyes he saw a scorpion swept along by the strong current get entangled in the exposed roots of a tree nearby. It was frantically but unsuccessfully trying to free itself. So he reached out to help it – and it stung him, painfully. He recoiled, then he reached out again – and again – until his hand was covered with blood and swollen like a balloon. A young man came along and said:

“Hey, stupid old man. What’s wrong with you? Only a fool risks his life for the sake of an ugly, useless creature. Don’t you know that you may kill yourself to save that ungrateful animal?”

Slowly the old man turned his head, and looking calmly in the stranger's eyes, he said: "Friend, because it is the nature of the scorpion to sting, why should I give up my own nature to save?"

Nouwen continues:

Well, that's the question: Why should we give up our nature to be compassionate even when we get stung in a biting, stinging world?<sup>2</sup>

The answer has to be: because Jesus calls us to be compassionate. As individuals and as a community. We are to feel the world's pain and to say, "I'll help." "We'll help." Either that or we'll be outing ourselves as less civilized than our Stone Age forebears. Amen

<sup>1</sup>James Gorman, "Ancient Bones That Tell a Story of Compassion," (*New York Times*, December 18, 2012, D1, D4).

<sup>2</sup>Henri J.M. Nouwen, "Compassion: Solidarity, Consolation and Comfort" (*America*, March 13, 1976, pp. 195-