

CALLED TO COMPASSION

We are conditioned as Christians to hear the word “shepherd” and think good things. We hear “shepherd” and think of hopeful Bible verses and stories. We think of Jesus. The word shepherd brings with it the idea of comfort, care, concern, help, support, love.

But then there are times when Scripture surprises us. Like in today’s passage from Ezekiel. Here, God mentions the word shepherd twelve times, and not once in reference to something good. No, God speaks to Ezekiel and twelve times God points out the ways that Israel’s shepherds—that is to say, the religious leaders of the Israelite people—are failing as shepherds. God lists off the things that they, as shepherds, *have not* done: strengthened the weak, healed the sick, doctored the injured, brought back the strayed, sought the lost, fed the hungry. Instead they have fed only themselves, clothed only themselves, and allowed the sheep of Israel to become easy prey: ignored, scattered, exposed and vulnerable. Shepherds, it seems, aren’t always good.

We see this everyday in our own time, too, don’t we? People who are supposed to be in place as our shepherds, as those who we expect to be caring, concerned, helpful, supportive, even loving, can turn out to be quite the opposite. We’ve seen images of police officers, particularly in the US, who we expect to serve and protect who instead shove and shoot and scatter the sheep. We’ve seen governments, including our own, whom we expect to bring equality and justice and instead break promises made to their most marginalized sheep. We’ve seen world leaders whom we expect will show compassion for their own and instead demand changes to benefit themselves and further oppress the sheep. Now, not everyone is a bad shepherd. After all, we’ve also seen police take a knee with others at protests calling out that Black Lives Matter. We’ve seen governments work slowly but surely towards truth and reconciliation with the Indigenous of our country. We’ve seen world leaders put their people first and essentially eradicate Covid-19 from their midst. But we can’t ignore the way that certain shepherds are able to manipulate and benefit from systems that continue to take them into places of power and authority. So, what can we do? This leads us into our second reading today.

In the book of Matthew, we hear that Jesus has been travelling from village to village teaching, preaching, and healing. And then we discover that beyond these actions, Jesus sees these crowds of people before him and around him, and he feels compassion for them. Despite being everywhere, these crowds appear to be getting nowhere because “they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (9:36). Jesus sees that they are the tired, walking wounded. In fact, a more literal translation of “harassed and helpless” is “oppressed and thrown to the ground.” They are not described here as “the poverty-stricken and meek” or “the sick and in need of curing,” they are the oppressed and thrown to the ground.

The plight of those who are consistently oppressed and thrown to the ground is something that has been brought to the forefront of our minds more recently. Particularly in terms of the lives of those who are Black, who are Indigenous, who are People of Colour. In other words, particularly in terms of race. And don’t for a moment believe that this is only a problem in the US, because it is absolutely a problem in Canada, too. Now, this isn’t a new issue; there have been other times in our recent history when systemic racism was brought to the forefront, but here’s what I’ve noticed this time: we are being asked over and over again not *just* to watch the news, or read an article or two, or pray for those who are systemically oppressed and harassed, but to do something more. And that *doing* may look like attending a protest, whether in real life or online; it may look like donating money to charities and organizations that provide help and support for those who are racially marginalized; it may look like making a sign that says “Black Lives Matter” and posting it on your front door; it may look like sharing links and resources and information with others. But more than all that, there is a call to

check ourselves more thoroughly. There is a call to recognize our own privilege. There is a call to see the ways that a system set in place by white colonizers over a hundred years ago continues to privilege some and disadvantage others. There is a call to make clear that it's not okay that this is the way things are, but it is okay to name them and claim them and make change; bring justice. It's a call to compassion.

You may have heard of the Dutch priest Henri Nouwen. He was a Harvard professor, a renowned speaker, a seasoned preacher, an experienced pastor, and the author of many books, and yet one of the times in his life when he learned the most about vulnerability and compassion was when none of those things made any difference to who he was. Henri worked for quite a while at L'Arche Daybreak in Richmond Hill. Daybreak is a home for women and men with intellectual disabilities. And what Henri discovered when he worked there was that none of his past accomplishments mattered to the women and men at Daybreak—they didn't know what any of that meant. What mattered to them was what happened in the moment. It left Henri to reclaim what he called his "unadorned self"—the self that is, as he puts it, "completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments." This is how I would define compassion: letting go of your accomplishments, your privilege, your comfortability, in order to become vulnerable and open to giving and receiving love—because what else is there to do when we're stripped of those things that we instinctually lean on?

This, of course, can be quite difficult and risky—we are afraid to make ourselves vulnerable. But this, I think, is the key to moving forward. We build these walls around ourselves, around our hearts, around our thoughts. Often we don't even know we've built them; they get added to slowly, over time, as we become ever more entrenched in the systems around us. And those walls are difficult to break down. Not because we don't want to break them down, but because we're so used to living in these systems that we forget to recognize that something like racism doesn't manifest itself as only hate, but also as privilege, access, ignorance, and apathy. It can be as simple as responding to the words "Black lives matter" with the retort, "All lives matter."

There's a wonderful comic strip artist named David Hayward who is also known by his comic strip's title, NakedPastor. This is likely because David's strips down the layers that can mask many of the truths within Christianity. David often portrays his comic strip characters as a shepherd and sheep. In a recent comic, he drew a single sheep stuck on a cliff, clinging so she wouldn't fall to her death. A shepherd is there, too, walking towards that sheep, presumably moved to compassion and the deep desire to not let this one sheep go neglected and ignored, especially when she could fall at any moment. Behind this shepherd figure is a large crowd of other sheep, all safely standing behind a rock wall, and all holding signs that say "All sheep matter." It's a perfect example of what we're up against. Certainly, every one of those sheep matter, but in the context of the situation, the lone sheep on the cliff is the one in need of help, is the one who has been neglected, scattered, unfed, injured, lost. And in the context of that situation, how could we, as the sheep safe behind that rock wall, make ourselves vulnerable alongside that lone sheep? How do we begin the job of dismantling those walls we've built?

Let's turn back to our passage from Matthew. When Jesus looked out and saw those crowds of harassed and helpless people, those sheep who had been scattered and made prey, he had compassion for them. The Greek word that means "to feel compassion" translates to mean "to be moved from the inward parts" or "for the bowels to yearn." It's an emotional feeling that stirs something deep within; it's a word that can be associated with your gut—you feel with this word, and you feel viscerally. Jesus didn't see those crowds and use the social stratification system of the time to decide who was "more worthy" of his mercy—he felt compassion for all of the harassed and helpless; he felt a deep longing right from his gut to serve the people in his midst, to be vulnerable alongside them, and, perhaps most importantly, to allow his compassion to drive him to take action. Jesus said to his disciples that the harvest was plentiful, but the labourers were few. And he asked them to pray to God for labourers.

Well, the disciples prayed, and then they became the answer to their own prayer. Jesus summoned them and gave them authority to cure the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, and cast out demons. Jesus called for those disciples to have compassion. He called them to recognize human need and meet that need with concrete action—by shepherding the way God intended for it to be done: through an openness to being vulnerable, through deeply felt compassion, through much needed justice.

One thing that's important to note is that Jesus didn't expect his apostles to do this alone; he sent them together. Jesus doesn't ask us to have compassion on this world all alone; he calls us to go out as a community—to labour together, as one. Being vulnerable with others is much easier than being vulnerable all on your own. Breaking down those walls we have built around us only goes so far when you do it individually, in your own mind, with your own thoughts. At some point, we all need to move from our heads and hearts into the real world where we can stand face to face and side by side with those who have been oppressed and thrown to the ground. We cannot lose our racism without letting others in. And we cannot let others in without opening ourselves up and letting our walls crumble.

And here's this thing. This is difficult work. This is uncomfortable work. This is long-term work. There is unlikely to be a day in our lifetimes when we can say we've come to the end, that racism is over. It is and will be an ever-present struggle in all our lives. And an integral part of that for those of us who are privileged by our whiteness is to never convince ourselves that we have arrived. The dismantling of walls is a lifetime commitment. Sounds daunting, doesn't it? But so does living in a world where your skin colour automatically leaves you vulnerable to discrimination, hate, and injustice. There is no justice without compassion. There is no compassion without vulnerability. There is no vulnerability without the acceptance that there is lifelong suffering. But just as Jesus called his disciples to work together to show compassion, to seek the lost sheep of Israel, to enter places where they would most certainly experience persecution and be turned away, so too are we called to compassion and to labour for justice; to immerse ourselves into the condition of being human, knowing that Jesus has been there, too—has been harassed, helpless, fearful, weak, tearful, and in pain.

This past week I read an article written by Adele Halliday. Adele is a Black woman who works as the Team Leader for Discipleship and Witness at the United Church of Canada's General Council Office. In the article, Adele responds to some wonderings; one of those is a wondering of what can be done to support her and other Black people at this time. And Adele's response is this: be prophetic. She says, "we are part of a faith tradition that names truths—I need you to do that . . . The work of racial justice is ours to do along with God's. I need you to partner with God in actively doing this work, and not to leave it for God only to do."

May we meet Jesus' call to compassion with love and determination, knowing that in order to break down the walls of the systems that are built up around us we must accept the ever-present struggle of making ourselves vulnerable and open to giving and receiving love. May we be prophetic in telling the truth of Christ's compassion for all, but particularly the harassed and helpless, the scattered and lost. May we be the labourers needed to bring justice to those who daily experience the oppression of systemic racism. May we be the shepherds this world needs. Amen.