

“Get A Job!”



Rev. Peggy Casteel-Huston
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Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 6: 30-37a; 53-56

³⁰ The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴ As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. ³⁵ When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; ³⁶ send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.” ³⁷ But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.”

⁵³ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. ⁵⁴ When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵ and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶ And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

The word of the Lord

We have all seen people standing on the street corners with signs asking for help. Sadly, I have heard people yell “Get A Job!” at them from their car windows. Likely, many of us may have wondered why these people do not ‘get a job’ especially right now when so many employers are begging for workers.

Likewise, as soon as this church opened its doors for worship, people began coming prior to worship asking for assistance. I have never yet been in a church where, on occasion, someone did not show up on Sunday asking for help.

These scenes play out so often that one can become indifferent to the suffering of others. Perhaps this is what was happening to the disciples in our story from Mark.

Jesus had invited the disciples to pull away from the people and rest awhile. The disciples had been so busy serving alongside of Jesus that apparently, they had not even had the opportunity to eat. But as the story goes, we know that as the disciples try to pull away from the crowd the people keep pursuing them. It was getting late. The disciples ask Jesus to send the people away.

I can imagine that they had heard enough stories of suffering, pain, hunger and need to last them a lifetime. Jesus' compassion for people never tired, so he tells his disciples to feed the people.

This is not what the disciples wanted at all. They craved down time with Jesus perhaps to process but also to rest. While Jesus' compassion never tired, I believe the disciples were experiencing some serious **compassion fatigue**.

You have heard the term and perhaps some of you have experienced it. You may have been on the front lines during the height of the pandemic. We all saw pictures of nurses, doctors, medical personnel of all sorts with deep marks on their faces where the wearing of PPE for extended hours had left its mark. We saw images of medical personnel who were not able to go home for fear of infecting their own families. People kept the grocery shelves stocked and worked tirelessly at great risk to themselves so that others could purchase food. Many stayed working at great cost to themselves and their families. The cost for some, the cost of their lives. During the height of the pandemic, it was not hard to imagine that for some there was compassion fatigue with so many sick, so many dying, and so much need.

The Greek word Mark used to describe how Jesus felt about the people pursuing the disciples and Him in that day was *splagxnízomai* pronounced (splang-nee-zo-my). *Splagxnízomai* connotes a very intense emotion. It is more than compassion, deeper than pity. The *splanxna* part of the Greek word means inward parts or where people understood that the seat of

affection lies. What Mark was saying is that Jesus' very being, His heart, His soul, His very being loves and cares for the people. For Jesus, His love, his care, his concern was and continues to be the very essence of who He is.

Remember that Mark told us that Jesus used a reference from Ezekiel 34 that Steve read for us this morning. Jesus said that the people were like sheep without a shepherd. Ezekiel's parable was meant to challenge the system in which the ruling class acted more like wolves than shepherds. God wanted those in power to look at people as sheep without a shepherd, but they didn't. What God saw was the ruling class making everything about themselves, they ate all the good pastures, they drank all the clear water and what was left they had trampled under their feet.

Jesus picked up on Ezekiel's message to continue to remind those in power of the social and religious practices that contribute to the misery of those in greatest need.

Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian ethicist, wrote that as much as we desire to be followers of Jesus, we must bear in mind that only Jesus could be Jesus. Niebuhr wrote, "Whatever justice (humanity) attains in their society in which they live is always an imperfect justice" and yet he wrote, "only imaginative justice, that is, love that begins by espousing the rights of the other rather than self, can achieve a modicum of fairness". Niebuhr believed that what Jesus did was to give each one of us a standard by which to judge both our personal and social righteousness.

Niebuhr would continue to say that as Christians, we often set ourselves up to be the moral idealists or the moral police. We get so secure in our own virtue so convinced that we are right that we judge harshly those in need. We judge that whatever led that person to their poverty, their choices, their actions, are not acceptable and therefore they do not deserve our help, yet we fail to ask how we deserve what we have.

Perhaps many of you have heard of Dr. Ruby Payne. Dr. Payne has studied and written several books on poverty. In my first pastoral call in Greene County, Indiana we were surrounded by so much pain, so much suffering, so much poverty that the ministers hosted a workshop on Ruby Payne's book.

Every person who lived in Greene County knew which church held the funding for the Greene County Ministerial Association. They knew the specified church and the designated days when assistance was given to those in need. One time, as clergy, we conducted a test. For 2 weeks our designated person at the church gave every person who came to the door of the church a \$10.00 certificate for gasoline at a local station. All they had to do was to provide us an address where they lived. After 2 weeks, we determined that we had given every person within a 2-3 block area a \$10.00 certificate for gas. As each person went home, they told a neighbor and the word quickly spread. We also learned that several who received the certificate were selling them to buy drugs.

I can tell you lots of stories but here is one more from Greene County. I met and tried to mentor and partner with a single woman who was going everywhere and standing on the corner with two little boys. I brought her and her boys to our church. They were couch surfing at the time (meaning staying where they could in someone else's home). Our church raised the money to pay the rent on a trailer for her for six months and people donated items to give them some basic furniture. We worked with the woman to get her a job and I would stop by once a week to bring groceries. A few weeks later I stopped by only to find another person living in the trailer. Apparently, our mother of these two young boys had sold out everything to this person including the furniture and left town. We never knew what happened to her or her boys.

Stories like these were plentiful and can lead to compassion fatigue and to a great deal of cynicism about the poor. Ruby Payne's workshop really challenged us but increased our awareness and understanding. In part of the workshop Payne asks if we could survive in a class different from our own?

Could you survive in poverty? If so, then you are skilled in the following:

- Knowing how to get someone out of jail.
- Knowing how to physically fight and defend myself.
- Live without a checking account or debit card.
- Be able to move in ½ day.
- Know how to survive when there is no money to pay the bills.

What about surviving in the middle class? Do you:

- know how to get your children into little league, piano lessons or soccer?
- know how to balance a checkbook?
- understand what an annuity is, term life insurance or what it means to have 80/20 medical insurance?
- talk to your children about college?
- repair items in your home almost immediately after they break?

What about surviving (if you would call it that) in the class of greatest wealth? Can you:

- read a menu in French or another language?
- say that you have several favorite restaurants all around the world?
- say that you own at least 2 residences that are staffed?
- give the name of your own legal counsel, designer and domestic employment service.
- host a party where key people attend?

Payne's point was to show how many hidden rules there are in differing classes of people and how difficult it can be to transition from one class to another. As people leave a certain class, relationships often get broken. For some they may only strive to leave the poverty class because it has become too painful. It takes a vision, a goal or sometimes a special talent or skill to move from one social class to another.

Sonia Sotomayor, when President Obama presented her as his nominee for the Supreme Court, shared her story of how her family made it out of poverty. She knew what it was like to live in a housing project. She understood what it is like to grow up with an alcoholic father. She credited her mother who dedicated herself to their education and who held a vision for them. Her mother bought her and her brother the Encyclopedia Britannica, something unheard of in the projects back then. Sonia is one story of a person who moved through all 3 social classes.

Ruby Payne reports that it is much more difficult than one would think to move from one social class to another. While we do hear stories like that of Sonia Sotomayor, fewer are ever able to move from poverty to even a low middle class.

Payne's teaching helped to open our eyes. We learned that what we were butting up against in Greene County were the rules of those in poverty, the rules governing survival, instincts, and lessons that people were

indoctrinated to. Dr. Payne offered no easy solutions for helping those in need, but she knew that it helped to understand more about poverty.

Now, I realize that in this church I am 'singing to the choir'. Soon we will hear from Tom Schaberg on your involvement in Edgewood Village. Recently, we have been reminded of the work you do with refugees, your involvement with community organizations such as Advent House and local food banks, your involvement beyond the United States in the Simbolei Academy, the Ludwig's in Niger, and the Haiti Nursing Foundation which I know I am only mentioning a few.

You PCO, you practice what Niebuhr described as imaginative justice, that is, love that begins by espousing the rights of the other rather than self in order to achieve a modicum of fairness. It is one of the many values this church holds that I respect so much.

It is good, at times, to be reminded that as you continue to practice imaginative justice that as a society, we will bump up against the unwritten yet deeply understood hidden rules within each class. It is good to also be reminded that we are not Jesus and that compassion fatigue is real.

Today, for today accept the praise you deserve, accept the thanks from me and others in this community, and be reminded that what you are doing is being a model of imaginative justice. What you are doing is modeling a standard for personal and social righteousness that will be a huge draw for people in this local community who want to partner with you in holding our community and our leaders to a Christ view of social righteousness.

Let us pray:

Lord of all creation, we thank you for your heart, your soul of love and justice that continued to pour from your son Jesus Christ. Through Christ poured the love of the God of all creation. We know that you would continue to have us be shepherds to sheep and not wolves that simply consume. Help us to continue to model the imaginative justice that speaks. In Jesus name, Amen