

## "A Shepherd of Compassion"

Based on Psalm 23, Jeremiah 23:1-6 and Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Delivered on July 18, 2021, at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Ruling Elder David R. Watts.

Have you ever “had one of those days”? Sometimes it seems like every day is one of those days! I know you agree. Let me outline one of my recent days: It began at 5:30 am to take someone I am sheltering to work, planning to return at 3 pm to pick him up, I was scheduled to be at work myself at 4. My son needed transportation to a physical therapy session in Pennsylvania from 8 to 9 am. I returned in time for a video chat with my doctor at 10 am. She ordered additional blood work and an ultrasound. Lab Corp had an opening so I got the blood work done but the hospital put the ultrasound off until Monday morning. Then my part-time job called, they needed me in at work as soon as possible, no later than 1 pm and to stay until closing because the manager needed to meet with her doctor to get the results of her cancer screening and the assistant manager needed to pick her up husband at the hospital after he broke four ribs. I called my shelter person to arrange an Uber ride home and I changed clothes for work. While dressing I noticed an old issue of Presbyterians Today magazine and flipped it open. The article showing was titled “Overcoming compassion fatigue”. This was my morning.

The reading from Jeremiah begins “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep”. With this statement, God tells us how seriously He takes the need to care for His children. It is not a sometimes, part time job, that can allow distraction or carelessness. This is serious, this is as it should be, this is a loving Father, attending to His children. This is spoken as a challenge to the religious leaders in Jerusalem, this is also a challenge to us, today! God says, “I take this seriously, so must you”. It is our job to care for those around us, the sick, the needy, the disabled, the suffering, the lonely, the blessed people who just don’t know where to turn and could use a kind word. Where are we required to start? Where are we permitted to stop?

In that Presbyterians Today article, Darla Carter wrote, “As the pandemic and politics continue to test the endurance of the country, it’s important to find ways to refresh and renew our bodies, minds and spirits.” We are advised to do whatever brings us joy, if it is playing in the dirt? Do it. If it is working on a hobby? Do it. If it is just taking a walk? Do that for yourself too.

Hannah Whitehall Smith wrote in 1878 that a “shepherd and a king may seem widely separated in rank, and yet their duties are the same. Each are bound to care for and protect those who are under their control.” She also concluded that if you are not fit to be a shepherd, you are not fit to be a king. We Christians have become so accustomed to looking exclusively at our side of things, that we often lose sight of God’s side. Sometimes we lose sight of our side and our needs. Jesus focused on unity, calling all people to himself, tax collectors as well as fishermen and people of all genders, Jews and Samaritans alike. If someone lived on the outskirts of town, Jesus would go to them as a compassionate healer and selfless friend. We are called to continue being that healer and friend.

In the reading from Mark, we find that the apostles have just returned from doing Jesus' work and are giving Jesus an accounting of what they have seen and done in His name. They are excited to tell him of their successes and acceptance as they traveled. Jesus listens and decides He needs a quiet space to take it all in. He gives them permission to take a well-deserved break. However, when He sees the crowds, and their needs, compassion sets in. He puts His own needs, and those of his apostles aside and ministers to the crowd, continuing into the villages, cities and farms, tending the sick in marketplaces and homes, allowing even healing touches. The affection that Jesus has for His people is a gut-wrenching sympathy. He is burdened by the sight of a desperate people with no where else to turn. But during his healing, He begins "teaching them many things" as he normally does throughout His ministry. He feeds the crowds spiritually as well as physically.

We wonder what it was that Jesus saw in the faces of the people that drew such a strong emotional reaction from Him, that he would not allow even His followers, to rest after their journey. Was it the sight of so much poverty, in the first century Galilee, that provoked Jesus? We know that Galilee was mainly an agricultural economy with a minor fishing industry. Most people lived on a vegetable diet with only occasional supplements of dairy or meat. About 90% of Galilee's residents lived at a subsistence level or below, there was no middle class. If you think our taxes are bad, Roman taxes were 20-40% for those who were barely scraping together a living. As a carpenter from Nazareth, Jesus understood the daily struggle for existence and survival. This may have explained the source of His compassion. Jesus was familiar with the Old Testament reading of "the sheep without a shepherd". Israel's leaders failed to care for the spiritual and material needs of God's people eliciting Jesus' passionate response. In the Old Testament we see two leaders who began as shepherds. King David and Moses each stand out as examples of true leadership shepherding and caring for their people, weeping over them and protecting them, but knowing when to take a break.

We see Jesus' compassion for the crowds signaling their "sheep without a shepherd" condition. Jesus continues to feed the people both materially and spiritually remaining available for the pastoral care of God's people. He models Himself for disciples to become future shepherds for God's flock letting them know there is no "convenient" time for ministry. Random interruptions will continue to be expected in our normal daily lives. We are often called upon to cancel and suspend many immediate plans, in order to care for those in need.

In the Gospel, Jesus proposes a Sabbath to allow the apostles to swap stories of their travels and successes. "Come away to a quiet place all by yourselves and rest a while" (Mark 6:31) Jesus proposes, but they had no leisure even to eat. Sabbath is deep in the Jewish tradition. God knows when to stop and step back, taking a deep breath and enjoying what has been accomplished. We see this in the bible as early as the Genesis creation narrative. We are told "on the seventh day God rested". Even God rested and refreshed.

Observing the Sabbath has disappeared from our world of today. It has been replaced with non-stop work, computers and cell phones enabling us to process data 24 hours a day. Emails, texts and phone calls arrive all day, often with video chats and zoom meetings. Technology follows us on vacation. To the disciples the Sabbath never happens. The crowds are waiting for them at the shoreline and in every village and town. They cannot find a quiet place and they now find the crowd is larger than ever. Jesus responds by abruptly changing the agenda. He feels compassion. The people are gathered "like sheep without a shepherd". He greets them, welcomes them, speaks to them and listens to them and their needs.

The disciples react as we would. They ask Jesus to send them away, instead he does the most remarkable, compassionate thing, He feeds them in every way he can, the elderly, the sick, the urgent, desperate, hungry and those in need of more than just food or healing. He heals them, bringing them wholeness. Work is never done. This is a commentary on what it means to be a Christian. We are asked to give our life away striving to obey and follow Jesus' example. For us we see it in a thousand and one decisions every day, large and small, those we notice, those we ignore commanding our precedence in life. Yes, we ask ourselves, when does self-sacrifice become unhealthy to ourselves and our families. We all have never-ending demands on our time and our resources. It is often a tension between giving our life away to serve others and attending to our own needs. As we tend to other people's needs, we also need to tend to our own. We need to offer ourselves compassion too. We can stay focused on the road ahead by finding something that makes us good, whole and healthy. We need to commit to it, taking time every day to renew ourselves and our well-being.

This gospel reminds us of the good news of God's love for everyone living their life in the gospel. Listen and look, strike a balance. Do what you can, and remember, the fringe of Jesus' healing cloak is available, IF we reach for it. We remain the arms and hands of Jesus, in today's world. We need to reach out for that healing touch whenever the opportunity presents itself, because you WILL save more than just yourself. Sometimes we need an outside resource and that we cannot do it all by ourselves. Use this as an opportunity to work together as a community of faith.

We have a loving Father, who attends to his needy children. He is seen as a Good Shepherd and a Royal King. It is our job to care for those around us, the sick, the needy, the disabled, the suffering, the lonely, the people who just don't know where to turn and could use a kind word. Begin with little steps. Do what you can, take a Sabbath when you can, but remember Jesus healed on the Sabbath too. Compassion works for us as well as others. Love God, love others and love yourself.

May the Grace and Peace of the Lord and the Holy Spirit be with you always, today and every day. Amen.

# Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)  
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 (NRSV) The ***apostles gathered*** around ***Jesus***, and ***told*** him all that they had done and taught. 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. And they went away in the ***boat*** to a deserted ***place*** by themselves. Now many saw them going and ***recognized*** them, and they ***hurried*** there on foot from all the ***towns*** and ***arrived ahead*** of them. 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. When they had ***crossed*** over, they came to ***land*** at Gennesaret and ***moored*** the boat. When they got out of the boat, ***people*** at once recognized him, and ***rushed*** about that whole ***region*** and ***began*** to ***bring*** the sick on ***mats*** to wherever they heard he was. 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***.