

June 7, 2015

Powerlessness....

**Matthew 9:35-38
The Rev. Dr. Tom Blair**

“Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’”

The Gospel writer Matthew knew exactly what he was writing about. Years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, it still stuck with him, how Jesus could read people like a book; see through their false personas and their thinly disguised facades, and get right to the core of what made them tick.

In this very brief vignette of Jesus’ early ministry, we see him in action, in cities and villages, assessing individuals who needed healing and tending and crowds who are nearly beyond help... ”harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” That is, specifically, they were harassed by Roman officials, overtaxed and worn down by forced obedience to a foreign government, helpless to do anything about it (because of the power of the occupying Roman army). They were also leaderless; with political power divided between quarreling religious elites and a puppet governor appointed by Rome- sheep without a shepherd. They were nearly beyond help, the walking wounded, and Jesus looked on them with compassion; what else could he do? (The Greek word here reads stronger than the English; word ‘compassion’ is one of the favorite words for students who begin to learn Greek.) The Greek word for compassion is ‘splachnizomai’; literally- to be moved in the inward parts, the seat of the affections, to feel pity, to have a heartfelt response, which is what Jesus did for them, just as he began to call his disciples, one by one, Matthew himself included.

As they say, Jesus didn’t call the qualified, he qualified the called, and Matthew, perhaps more than any other disciple, could testify to that. As a tax collector, hated by Jews and manipulated by Romans, he was perhaps the most outcast and unlikely disciple to be called. He was powerless to change his circumstances and had been living a fairly unmanageable life, living between a rock and a hard place, caught between needing to make a living but having to exploit his fellow countrymen to do so; he was unable to change, going nowhere, slowly.

Today is our second in our Sizzlin’ Summer Sermon Series, based on Richard Rohr’s book, ‘Breathing Underwater- Spirituality and the Twelve Steps.’ This is our first lesson in the process- and it is about Powerlessness; as in the sentence we have for our Preparation for Worship: *‘We admitted that we were powerless.... that our lives had become unmanageable.’* These are the words from the Big Book, for Alcoholics Anonymous, and they hit the nail on the head. This is the first, most necessary step in beginning to change anything; that we recognize that life as it is, is currently unmanageable.

Perhaps provocatively, Richard Rohr proposes that this phenomenon applies to virtually all people, rich and poor, successful and unsuccessful in life (by whatever measure you'd like to choose), alcoholic or sober, that, "God makes sure that several things will come your way in life that you cannot manage on your own." Think about that a minute.

I remember a year or so ago, when Dr. Craig Barnes, from Princeton Seminary, came to preach for us, and led a great Adult Sunday School class, too. His leading question was this, "How many of you are living the life you thought you'd be living when you were 17 years old?" Not a single hand went up. He said that he's never had a hand go up when he's asked that question. Interesting. Maybe he's on to something. When it comes right down to it, (and maybe it has something to do with where the question is being asked, in a church, where our guard might be down a little bit and our collective honesty level may be pretty high...) there are things over which we have to admit our powerlessness: taxes, yes—and death, too, and it's real.

There is the car accident that took my cousin's life in 1983; and the tragedy that took someone's life you know, too.

There are the unforeseen circumstances, accidents and diseases that have come and turned life upside-down; life twists and turns that you couldn't have seen coming, regardless of how closely you were trying to keep track. And when you go back and imagine how you thought it would all be; you may agree with the words our author cites from the medieval German Mystic Meister Eckhart, "the spiritual life has much more to do with subtraction than it does with addition." Those things subtracted from our lives are generally not the things we have done on our own; life has a way of disciplining us, testing us, maybe even harassing us, trying to get our attention. From a faith standpoint, it's all about getting our focusing and helping us to live our lives as God's children, together.

Fred Craddock, one of the most understated and greatest preachers of our lifetimes, once wrote an essay in which he claimed there are basically two kinds of faith. There is a faith for Christians that is best described as "faith because..." A person with this type of faith claims, "I have faith because of the wonderful things God has done, because of the daily signs of God's blessings, or because of the marks of salvation in my life." That is faith as gratitude, which is clearly encouraged in the Bible, but it really isn't all that hard. All you have to do to find this is pay attention to the blessings of life... the flowers of the fields, a great cup of coffee, a really close and dear friend...

There is another faith, a stronger faith that is best described as "faith in spite of..." This is a faith that emerges only in the moments when God says, "No." In the face of tragic loss, in great confusion or heartache, this believer has learned to say, "Nevertheless I still believe."

It is this "faith in spite of" that shapes our souls even more than "faith because of." It is then that we have to focus our lives not so much upon our dreams for what may happen, but upon the God in whom we trust no matter what happens. It is after experiencing some of life's "No's", that we lose what has been called 'our instrumental use' for God. That is when we believe, one way or the other, that God is the big wish-fulfiller in the sky. (God is not that.)

Then we face the most important questions of the soul: “Will you still love God even when that love comes without the blessings? Even when it is God plus nothing? Is the love of God enough?” When we begin to reach that point, which is all about recognizing our powerlessness, our admission of unmanageability, then we can hear the call of another- maybe even Jesus, pulling us another way.

When we admit to our powerlessness, harassed and helpless, we are met by the same One who met Matthew and the others and offers us exactly what he offered him and everyone else. Nothing more and nothing less than himself, body and soul, present and accounted for in the meal that he shared. In the powerlessness that we acknowledge, in the unmanageabilities of life that we confront, Jesus meets us with himself. He doesn't show us the way; he is the way. The answers that we find with Jesus don't come on high with clouds descending, they come out of our real lives and in real-life decisions we need to make and stick to, day by day.

And if we continue to stick by him, acknowledging Jesus' presence with us, sight unseen, then perhaps- like those harassed and helpless crowds, and even like the unqualified disciples, we can recognize a new measure of grace in our lives that gives us a new hope beyond what we can presently see, and a need in our lives that we cannot fulfill on our own.

That is, ultimately, the reason we are here today [or are reading this sermon!]...to be filled with God, in word and prayer and song, and also, to meet Jesus again in the meal that has been prepared for us; given freely, lovingly, thankfully, for us and for our salvation. Amen.