



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Right Reverend Dean E. Wolfe, *Rector*

Sheep Without A Shepherd

*Sermon preached at the 11 o'clock service, June 18, 2017
The Second Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 9:35-10:8*

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.
Take our lips and speak through them.
Take our hearts and see through them.
Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

I have to tell you, it's been an incredible couple of weeks for me and my family. The Institution service (which so many of you attended) was such a glorious worship experience! I'm so grateful for all the people who helped put together that extraordinary liturgy and the lovely reception that followed.

We heard the soaring preaching of our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, calling us to "Be Witnesses!" and we heard the deeply thoughtful comments of our diocesan bishop, Andy Dietsche: both of them dear, dear friends of mine. We had grand music provided by our choirs (including a hymn written by our own Bill Trafka). Ellen and I had family and friends visiting from all over, and the evening was one of the highlights of my life in ministry. I am now, officially, your Rector!

And, in the midst of preparing for that great celebration, I received the news that my mother had died. Isn't that the way life goes? Isn't that always the way? A good friend of mine says the wonderful and the terrible are always inter-twined with one another, and it seems you can't have the one without experiencing the other. After suffering from dementia for such a long time, it was a true blessing for my mother to die. But it was also—as so many of you know from your own lives and your own losses—it was also the death of my last living parent. And that is a hard loss, regardless of the circumstances. But then, how blessed it was for us to have our son and his girlfriend, Ellie, with us and to have some of our oldest and dearest friends around us when we received that sad news.

And then, this week, I began to wonder if the entire world had gone completely mad! Congressmen and women (and their staffs) were practicing for a charity baseball game in Alexandria, Virginia, when they were targeted by a gunman wielding an assault rifle. Representative Steve Scalise was critically wounded along with three others, including two Capitol Police officers on the protection detail, before the gunman himself was killed.

It wasn't even the only mass shooting on that particular day. That very same day, a gunman at a U.P.S. facility in San Francisco killed three co-workers before killing himself. For the record, there have been, as of Wednesday, 154 mass shootings in the United States so far this year. There have been 6880 gun-related deaths and a reported 13,504 firearm injuries.¹ To put that into perspective, if we held a memorial liturgy during which all the names of those who were killed by guns were read, it would take approximately 8 hours and 12 minutes just to read their names alone.

In the gospel appointed for today, Jesus travels through the villages and the cities. He's teaching in the

¹*Fortune Magazine*, According to the Watchdog group Gun Violence Archives, Online, June 14th, 2017, 4:32 pm EST

synagogues and he's healing as many people as he can. He's inundated by the crowds, pushed and pulled by their dis-ease, by their maladies and all their sicknesses. He is drawn to care for them because of his compassion; one man standing knee-deep in a sea of suffering. Jesus consistently expresses a "divine kind-heartedness" for the people of God (even when they're not all that "kind-hearted" to him in return). He saw the people as they really were—as WE really are—harassed, helpless, "like sheep without a shepherd." Death, grief, illnesses great and small, apartment tower fires, terrorist bombings, assassination attempts, gun violence, political chaos: we are knee-deep in a sea of suffering.

The author of Matthew says, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them. In the Greek, the word is *esplagnisthe*, an exceptionally strong word associated with the bowels² as, "to be moved to one's bowels." In ancient culture, the bowels were understood to be the seat of love and compassion, much as we think of the heart in modern culture.

Jesus was moved to the depths of his being because the people were "harassed and helpless." In the Greek, these too are strong words that could have been translated "skinned," "mangled," and "thrown down," rather than "harassed" and "helpless." Can you imagine it, that holy moment when Jesus is moved to his very soul, his face illumined? The very moment when the "wonderfulness of his compassion" and the "terribleness of the human condition" completely intertwine?

Jesus tells his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few." Here Jesus speaks out of his theology of abundance. There is so great a crop to gather, so very many injured souls—more than can be imagined—that he feels short of the laborers to gather them in. They want to be healed, but there just aren't enough people to care for all of them. And so Jesus summons his disciples and he gives them authority over unclean spirits to cast them out and the authority to cure every disease and every sickness.

I wonder if the disciples ever wanted that kind of authority?

I wonder if the disciples would have been just as happy to assist Jesus as he sought to heal the lame, the blind, and the demon-possessed? I can imagine the disciples speaking to him around an evening fire: "Jesus, I'm a fisherman! I understand the wind and the tides. I know how to sew strong nets and how to handle a boat in a high sea. But I don't know one blessed thing about any of this." Can't we imagine the disciples offering all the excuses we would offer? "I am not ready." "I am not able." "I am not the One."

But Jesus says only this: "Cure the sick. Raise the dead. Cleanse the lepers. Cast out demons. You received without payment, give without payment."

By the way, did you notice that you have to get close in to do this work? Did you notice that you can't phone this in? Did you notice that cleansing lepers is dirty, difficult work that then becomes holy and sacred work because it's what God asks of us.

And so the disciples are sent. Bartholomew, our Patron Saint, is sent. And, of course, so are we. So are we all. We, who did not ask for this assignment, are called to come and help. And it should be said, we are not really the best or the brightest. Jesus never seems to call the most gifted or the most able. There are countless people more able, multitudes more gifted...and yet here we are. Here we are, called to be the people of God and, finally, empowered by a God who loves us beyond all belief.

That sacred and secular monk Thomas Merton wrote, "Faith *means* doubt; it's not the suppression of doubt. You overcome doubt by going through it. The person of faith who's never experienced doubt...is not a person of faith."

² Progressive Involvement, <http://www.progressiveinvolvement.com> June 12, 2017, Pentecost 2 Matthew 9:35-10:8 p. 1

We've been making greater use of the Creeds in worship since I arrived. These are the historic compromises of the Christian faith. The places where we found common ground after extraordinary struggle. The Latin word *credo*, from which we get our word "creed," is usually translated, "I believe." But it means literally, "I set my heart upon." It does not mean, "I set my head, my intellect upon." Nor does it mean, "I hold these as mere opinion, even though they're unsupported by any empirical evidence." To have religious faith, *credo*, is to hold dear, to prize, and yes even to love. The early Christians knew when they said the Creed, they were talking about a matter of heart. And this business of faith, is it not truly a matter of the heart?

The Olympic diver Greg Louganis was once asked how he overcame his fear of jumping from the high diving platform, especially after one particularly frightening episode when he hit his head on the diving board while completing a complicated somersault. And the diver said, "Well, you take your heart and throw it off the board. Then you dive in after it."

It sounds like falling in love, and coming to faith in God is a little like falling in love. First, before there's anything, there is the desire; the hope for a relationship. The relationship commences only when one being desires another. And with God, we are desired from the very beginning, and even before the very beginning. God longed for us and sought us out even before we were aware of God's presence. Even before we were created!

Theologian and Bishop William Willimon writes about a course he took in his last year at Yale Divinity School. His Church History professor had invited an Orthodox priest to lecture and the priest gave a rather dry talk on the development of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. At the end of the lecture, one earnest student asked, "Father Theodore, what can one do when one finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the creed?"

The priest looked confused. "Well, you just say it. It's not that hard to master. With a little effort, most can quickly learn it by heart." "No, you don't understand," continued the student. "What am I to do when I have difficulty affirming parts of the creed like the Virgin Birth?" The priest continued to look confused. "You just say it. Particularly when you have difficulty believing it, you just keep saying it. It will come to you eventually." Exasperated, the student, a product of the same church and culture that has produced most of us pleaded, "How can I with integrity affirm a creed in which I do not believe?" And the priest responded, "It's not your creed, young man! "It's our creed. Keep saying it, for heaven's sake. Eventually it may come to you!"

Father Theodore knew we need to keep even the commitments that we have not yet made. And by repeating an unfamiliar formula or a concept like the Creed, which stretches our analytical side, we can arrive at a point of belief that may be as exciting as it is surprising. In her Autobiography, Margot Asquith wrote that Benjamin Jowett once told her, "My dear child, you must believe in God in spite of what the clergy tell you." I am so sorry if this clergyperson hasn't been much help.

Patrick White, the Australian author and Nobel Prize winner, expressed it far better than I ever could when he wrote: "What do I believe? I am accused of not making it explicit. How to be explicit about a grandeur too overwhelming to express, a daily wrestling match with an opponent whose limbs never become material, a struggle from which the sweat and blood are scattered on the pages of anything the serious writer writes? A belief contained less in what is said than in the silences. In patterns on water. A gust of wind. A flower opening."

Out of an incomprehensible compassion, our God comes in search of us, to rescue us from our grief, our violence, and our shame. And sometimes, sometimes even when we can't see or touch or even feel, we may finally trust... and even, believe.

Amen.

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