

Sermon: Our places of pain

How does being in a crowd affect you? Do you like being in a crowd? Some people love crowds and find lots of people around them energizing. Others don't like crowds much at all. Lots of people all around make them feel nervous or even isolated. Neither attitude is necessarily right or wrong, and a lot of how you feel about crowds is probably based on your personality more than anything.

But whether you are an extrovert or an introvert, when it comes to crowds, there are two things we find in today's passage that should be true of all followers of Jesus Christ. Regardless of your personality type, we should all be people of compassion and prayer. That was Jesus' response, and if we are Jesus' followers, that is, if we are disciples of Christ, then that should be our response too.

There's a lot of pain in the world today. But you don't need me to tell you that. It's an everyday reality; physical pain, emotional pain, spiritual pain, and the systemic pain of violence, injustice, poverty, racism, to mention just a few. We read about in the news. We see it in the tears of others and hear it in their voices.

Every one of you could tell a story about pain you have lived through and pain you are living with today, whether it's your own, a loved one's, or a stranger's. What's your story of pain today? Where does it hurt?

I wouldn't be surprised if you are thinking, "Well that's a downer way to start a sermon." Yes, I get it, but I think pain is one of the threads woven throughout today's gospel, just like it was last week. There was a lot of pain in Jesus' day too, his own as well as that of others he met.

In last week's gospel Jesus encountered the pain of a father whose little girl had died and a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years.

Before that he touched the pain of a leper, a woman's fever, a man's paralyzed legs, a man's heart and mind possessed by demons, and another father whose child had died.

Last week I described Jesus as aligning his life in two directions. He aligned himself with the people, events, circumstances, concerns, and needs that were before him. I called that his alignment with the horizontal axis of life. And he aligned himself with whatever was being called for in the name of God: love, acceptance, forgiveness, meaning, hospitality, justice, mercy, hope, healing, new life. I called that his alignment with the vertical axis of life. He lived and died at the intersection of those two axes.

In today's gospel Jesus continues that alignment. He's going 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." Behind each of those actions is some kind of pain.

That pain, Jesus says, is like a harvest waiting for laborers to show up. But the laborers are few. When it comes to pain there always seems to be more harvest than laborers. What do we do with the pain of the world?

For those of us in the church prayer is often our first response to pain. Think about your own prayer requests, when someone has asked you to pray for her or him, or what we hear each week in the Prayers of the People. It's often a list of where it hurts. We pray for some kind of relief for ourselves, others, and the world. So, it's not really surprising that Jesus tells his disciples, "Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." He's telling them to pray that someone will enter the fields of pain and do something to provide relief, heal, and fix things.

"O Lord, please send laborers into your harvest. Amen." It's short, simple, and direct.

Here's what strikes me about what Jesus does next. He barely gives the disciples – and don't we all claim to be his disciples? – enough time to pray and say "Amen" before he calls them together and sends them out with authority to be the someone's, the laborers, who respond to the pain, to offer relief, to heal the brokenness, and make a difference. He's making his disciples a part of the answer to the prayer they've just offered.

He's telling his disciples to align their lives with their prayer. If we are going to pray for the pain and needs of others and the world then we also need to give our hands and feet to our prayer. We need to embody and enact our prayer. We too must be a part of the answer to our prayer.

Jesus has shown us the dual alignment of his life and is calling us to that same alignment in our own lives. That means facing and dealing with our pain and the pain of others. And that's not easy. Most of us, I suspect, don't want to. It's just too darn painful.

A few years ago, I had a friend that said to me, "Carol, do you want to know how I got to be so smart?" I laughed and said, "Sure, tell me." They said, "Carol, most everything I have learned I learned through suffering."

This wasn't the first time that they had presented me with that question, and I had to wonder if they had forgotten they already shared that story with me or did they just like telling it. I realized after some careful thought they weren't talking about their suffering; they were talking about mine.

They were telling me to pay attention to my suffering, to your suffering, to the suffering I see in the world around me.

The poet David Whyte writes, "Pain is the doorway to the here and now." It is "an ultimate form of grounding" in this moment, this body, this limb, this loss, this heartbreak. It tells us we "cannot live forever alone or in isolation" and makes us understand that we need each other.

Pain is the first proper step to real compassion; it can be a foundation for understanding all those who struggle with their existence.

I think that's what's going on when Jesus saw the crowds in today's gospel and "had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

I wonder if Jesus felt that in himself before he saw and felt it in them. In Matthew's account of the gospel Jesus describes four times his own coming pain and death. And yet, he never turned aside from his own pain or the pain of others.

What if instead of turning away from our pain or the pain of another we let it be our teacher? What if we let it ground us right here, right now, in this moment? What if we let it open our eyes and hearts to the needs before us? What if we listened for what it is asking? And then we responded with gentle hands, wise minds, and soft hearts.

What is the pain you feel in your life today? What is the pain you hear in the lives of others today? And what is that pain asking of you today? Here's why I think all this matters.

I think we often misunderstand God's kingdom as an escape from the brokenness and pain of life. That's not the kingdom. The kingdom is a deeper engagement with and a response to the brokenness and pain.

If the kingdom of heaven is to come it will come through us and our response to the suffering and pain of the world, this town, and one another. I think that's why when Jesus sent the disciples to "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons," he told them, "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'"

The kingdom shows up when with compassion we feel and suffer with another's pain and reach out to offer relief, to heal, and make a difference. In a few minutes you and I will pray, as we do every Sunday, "thy kingdom come." I wonder in what ways you and I will give our hands and feet to that prayer. In what ways will we be a part of the answer to our own prayer?
Amen