

Compassion

“God is love...” do we hear this enough? For many years signs at sporting events and bumper stickers read John 3:16, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life...” I can’t remember when I last saw a sign or bumper sticker reading John 3:16.

So maybe we should start a new movement: signs, bumper stickers that read, 1 John 4:8, “God is love...” Perhaps we don’t hear this enough because we can be confused about what love means.

And we may not know or remember the two truths that John tells us in his 1st letter after telling us “God is love.” First, “there is no fear in love...” (4:18). And, then, “we love because God first loved us...” (4:19). We have to learn love, and learn about it all of our lives.

Today’s Gospel helps us to learn again about love, about God. Jesus is concerned about his disciples, he loved them, he knew their need for rest and renewal, but he’s also concerned for the many who follow him, those who need healing, those who need to be loved, to learn about love, to receive love so that they can love. They are like sheep without a shepherd.

That’s an image used throughout the Old and New Testaments – the need for a shepherd to guide the flock, lead the flock from being lost. The shepherd leads the flock to find food, nourishment. The shepherd keeps the flock safe, defended from enemies. Jesus at one point proclaims, “I am the good shepherd.”

Jesus is the good shepherd because he has compassion, love for all people. Jesus knows God is love. Jesus tries to share love with all. God is compassion.

What is strange about today’s Gospel reading is that 18 verses have been left out; we jump from verse 34 to verse 53. Two of the most amazing stories in the four gospels are not included: the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus walking on the water at night to come and help his disciples in the boat on the storm-tossed sea.

Maybe these miraculous events get in the way of our rational world understanding God’s love for us. These are two of seven signs of glory St. John uses in his Gospel. These two stories have comforted believers through the centuries and given hope to those in the darkest of times.

Ultimately it is the story of the cross where we know God is love. St. Paul discovered this. Reconciliation, peace, unity, love comes through the cross, through Jesus’ embrace of suffering and death. This is the true meaning of compassion – to suffer with others.

Some weeks ago in a sermon, I mentioned a book I’m reading, “Forged in Crisis: The Power of Courageous Leadership in Turbulent Times.” Recently I read the chapter on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young German pastor killed by the Nazi’s.

I knew that Bonhoeffer had gone to New York in 1939 to avoid service in the German Army. What I didn’t know was that after only 1 week in New York he decided to return to Germany and work with the resistance, eventually with their planning to assassinate Hitler. He writes about this decision:

I have come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life [there], after the war if I do not share [in] the trials of this time with my people... Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make that choice in security. (p. 284)

Bonhoeffer's decision reminded me of Jesus' decision to go to Jerusalem, to face the authorities, not to resist arrest. This is compassion. This is love. This is what overcomes fear. This is what teaches others about God, about love.

God is love. God is compassion. How do we live this truth? How do we teach this truth to others? It all begins with our ability to be compassionate, to suffer with others.