

Sermon – 2nd Easter
Mark 10:46-52
April 8, 2018

“Compassion – Life Together”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German pastor and teacher of the early 20th century, in his book *“Life Together”* wrote; *“the (Christian)...praises...God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for the bodily presence of a brother. The prisoner, the sick person, the Christian in exile sees in the companionship of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God. Visitor and visited...recognize in each other the Christ who is present in the body, they receive and meet each other as one meets the Lord, in reverence, humility and joy.”* In these wonderful words Bonhoeffer puts his finger on a paradox – but a very Lutheran one – God comes to people in surprising, even startling ways.

God the creator is found not by gazing at the heavens but by gazing into the eyes of our neighbors. God who enjoys the company of angels is here on earth the one who is lonely. God who has destroyed the power of death is the one who is beset by grief. God who has overcome the sins of the world is nonetheless the one who day by day is enticed and accused by sin. This is the God who comes, as another German pastor named Luther once said, in the form of opposites – God in “distressing disguises.” Speaking of Luther, he counted among his favorite Scriptures Psalm 46, one of our readings today. It is on one hand a song of praise to a mighty and powerful God – one who *“lifts his voice and the earth melts.”* But implanted in the midst of the Psalm is reference to a stream, which makes glad the city of God.

A stream is a curious metaphor Luther said when talking about *“the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.”* Streams trickle along – while oceans and seas inspire awe. Yet this Psalm says, God is found in the small stream, not the oceans whose vast water can swallow mountains. The little stream is exalted, it makes glad the kingdom of God – so let the forces of this world like sin and death rage and foam, God comes and calms us with a slow, steady supply of life. Luther wrote *“our little spring of water is also a living fountain.”*

In Acts chapter 6, is about a little spring of water - the church - flush from the exuberance and power of Pentecost – and confronted by the complexities of human need. It has a Holy Spirit moment. It sees something in the faces of widows and hears something even in their complaints. God is crying out to his young church, not just poor women. God is in their need. The church must therefore adapt, quickly, from its conception as being only the proclaimer of an apostolic truth to the practitioner of genuine love. The church must learn that the aching hearts of people, in this case widows, a suffering aggravated by empty bellies and parched throats - need Christ as much as souls awash in sin and minds conflicted by false belief.

And so a man named Stephen, *“full of faith”* Acts 6:5 says, is chosen to be, as Bonhoeffer would say, *“a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God...the Christ who is present in the body.”* Jesus the grieving visited by Jesus the comforter. Jesus the hungry one fed by Jesus the generous one. We are today celebrating and consecrating a ministry aptly named after this Stephen – the *“full of faith”* one.

Stephen Ministry will be entrusted to a leadership team, of which I am a proud but small part, and grateful to be joined by Peggy and Scott Langelin. We set them apart today for the task of caring which in a Holy Spirit moment the church of Jerusalem discovered would be one of the pillars upon which the kingdom of God would be set. I along with Scott and Peggy know we are but links in a much larger chain of love and compassion called Calvary Lutheran. We commission today - set apart that is – much like the early church did. We are determined here to do what our Lord Christ told us to do, to neglect nothing, not the teaching of the word and nor the living of it.

We're imitators not originators. Already our leadership team has been joined by six other Calvary members are also full of faith and will be fully equipped Stephen Ministers by summer's end. We've much to celebrate today, and that is why we come before you to ask your prayers and your blessing. Life together is so important. Bonhoeffer was right – *“visitor and visited...recognize in each other the Christ who is present in the body, they receive and meet each other as one meets the Lord, in reverence, humility and joy.”* Nothing can surpass the love Jesus Christ has for you. But through our Stephen Ministry we're going to strive to make sure the love of this congregation comes as close as humanly possible.

In Mark 10:44-45, Jesus, responding to a couple of his disciples, James and John, who fancied the Kingdom of God as a realm of the influential and powerful, said (I'm paraphrasing here) “uh uh.” The kingdom of God comes not from above but from beneath and from within. It arises out of loss – because it arose out of the cross. Grievers like Mary Magdalene were the first to receive it. The kingdom of God is men and women who have been hurt helping those who presently do - sinners reminding one another of the Lord who forgives - men and women who have enough making sure those who don't - don't for long. It is a kingdom of servants, worshipping a servant King by asking, as this King once did to a blind man *“what do you want me to do for you.”*

This is why we celebrate and consecrate Stephen Ministry today – not exulting in our compassion and kindness but releasing the compassion and kindness Christ first showed us, so that as it trickles like a stream from our hearts – the heart of a congregation called Calvary that is, it will indeed make glad the heart of God, and those toward whom his heart is always inclined, the ones he loves – you. AMEN