

Last week in my sermon I spoke about having compassion for others and what we sometimes (I sometimes) do instead; try to put a blanket over my head to block out the world and its problems. It doesn't work very well, and it doesn't solve a thing.

Today, I'd like to take that idea of compassion a step further, because Jesus **takes** us a step further past compassion as we remember that Jesus is our Good Shepherd. There was a pastor in town a few years ago that encouraged all the churches in Lakeville and Salisbury sign up to be one intentional compassionate community. It sounded like a wonderful idea. The thought was that we would all promote caring for each other in our community rather than only think about ones in our own parish or religious tradition.

Compassion is a good thing. These last few weeks many can say that they truly have compassion for those who live in Minneapolis and other cities where there has been racial violence and discrimination. With the Eric Chauvin trial behind us, and he in solitary confinement, we who are allies of the black community can breathe one sigh of relief that justice has been served ...A police officer has been held accountable for murder. But policing in Minnesota and in many other states and cities is still woefully falling short of the mark.

Our church still has problems too in this area. There was a recent Racial Audit of leadership of the Episcopal Church and a report has been released of the findings of the audit. Our Church's leadership, like it's membership, is overwhelmingly white. But we are a compassionate church, of course. The audit found that white leaders and leaders of color tend to perceive discrimination differently. People of color said that they have often felt marginalized, despite the church's professed commitment to racial reconciliation. White Episcopalians on the other hand frequently weren't aware of how race has shaped their lives and their church.

A primary pattern was the tension experienced by people of color who feel both invisible and "hyper-visible" in the church. One leader, identified in the report as a person of color, described feeling invisible while in a room with white bishops: "I'm standing there. But they're talking, they're not even making eye contact with me. I'm just kind of right there."

"Hyper-visibility" was described as a kind of tokenism, when people of color are singled out because of their race, such as to serve on race-related committees or to fulfill diversity requirements. "I don't feel like clergy. I feel like a commodity," one Black priest said. "I'm on these leadership groups so I can check a box, or the leaders can check a box."ⁱ

We have a long way to go in both our church and in society. We can be compassionate. But it's kind of a one way virtue. I am going to help you. And you will receive my help, my compassion.

That was what troubled me about the Salisbury pastor's idea. It seemed to me to be a one way street. We religious types would have the upper hand and would graciously lend that hand to others. People of color sense that about society as well. We have compassion, hopefully. More is needed.

Jesus, in our Gospel passage today shows us a better way of thinking about our relationships with others. Jesus, our shepherd, not only takes care of the sheep in his flock, having compassion for the lambs, but he knows them. And they know him. That's something quite a bit more than having compassion or sympathy for someone. When you know someone and they know you, you see each other face to face, and heart to heart.

What else does it mean to really know someone? Well, let's think about that together. We use the word "know" in more than one way. I **know** a lot of people. How many? Well, I can start with my contacts on my phone. I was surprised to see that I have over a 1000 contacts but knowing them is pretty superficial. OK. So, how many people do I not only know in that broad sense, but I know something about them: where they live or know about their family. That's going to cut that number down substantially.

That's still superficial though, isn't it. Knowing facts about someone doesn't seem like what Jesus means when he says he knows his flock and they know him. Getting more to the heart of the matter, how many people do I REALLY know? My sons and their wives, my cousins and their spouses, my good friends, the parishioners here at Trinity and my close buddies in AA. Gosh, now that I think about it, maybe my AA sponsor knows me more than almost any human being. And I think I know her very well. We've had a close relationship for many years. We tell each other things that we might not tell a family member or even a friend.

What makes that so? Well, it has to do with trust, doesn't it. I only know my AA sponsor so well because she and I trust each other. I know her fears and her joys. She knows some of my most closely held secrets. We know each other.

Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett were soulmates and poets. They were people who had the ability to put things into words that only really gifted writers can do. Elizabeth wrote *Sonnets from the Portuguese* for her husband and one phrase I came across shows the depth of their knowing of each other.

*"The face of all the world changed, when I first heard the footsteps of your soul."*ⁱⁱ

This image mirrors Christ's knowledge of us. And what if we knew our Good Shepherd like this too. We trust God and we want to know God. Our prayers and our sighs bring us closer to this mutual knowing. Sometimes it is beyond words. When I sigh, God knows why and understands, even if I'm not so sure I know why.

The apostle Paul writes about this when he writes to the people in Rome:

“... but that very Spirit intercedes **with sighs too deep for words.** (Romans 8:26b) *God sighs too?*

We can pray that someday, some way, God will help us to know each other in the way that God knows us. Then we will have more than just compassion for another person, we will be able to see others just as God sees us.

ⁱ <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2021/04/19/episcopal-church-releases-racial-audit-of-leadership-citing-nine-patterns-of-racism-in-church-culture/>

ⁱⁱⁱⁱⁱⁱ A. Philip Parham, *Letting God*, April 21 reflection.