

Last week I suggested that the most important goal in life is to discover who we are in our deepest being, and then to live life as our Creator intended. There are so many forces that call us away from our true identity with the result being a world filled with unhappy, frustrated, and unfulfilled people. Doesn't it make logical sense that the Creator knows what is best for what he created? And the Creator's will is no secret as it has been revealed through his Son, and we have been given the gift of Holy Scripture to teach us what is true about God, this life, the world, and ourselves.

The Gospel passage today is yet one more chapter of the story of who we are. It tells us about the charge Jesus gave to his disciples, that they have been called to be compassionate and includes the warning that they will encounter tough times ahead. They will not always be welcomed and their message will get them into serious trouble. He saw how many people were suffering in so many ways, and he sent his followers out to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. So, what was the primary driving force that caused Jesus to try to help hurting people? We are told that when he saw the crowds, "he had *compassion* on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Let's examine this word "compassion" for a bit. We know about the "Passion of Christ" we remember during Holy Week which refers to his suffering. So, compassion must mean to suffer with. Jesus set the example and calls upon his disciples to do the same. "Com-passion." "Feeling with." Feeling another's pain, another's suffering. In a way, it is entering into another person's life in that moment.

Jesus tells the twelve out to preach and heal those for whom he has such great compassion. We might overhear him saying something like, "Heal every disease and sickness. Cast out evil spirits. Take the message of the Kingdom to those who are suffering. Help me care for them. Have "compassion" on them. Feel with them. I can't do it all by myself. The task is too great to be done alone, even by me, and it is not God's purpose that it all be done by me. You are in this, too. It cannot be accomplished without you. Before long you are going to be my Body on earth, so you'd better get out there and start learning what that means before I leave you."

So, the followers of Jesus, his disciples, the ones who had left fishing nets and families to follow and learn from this magnetic young man who spoke so personally of his heavenly Father, these twelve poorly prepared people were now to take their first steps as apostles, those who are sent out to do for the hurting of the world that which Jesus himself wishes to be done.

You know, when you think about it, we have many ways of learning about God. We learn from Holy Scripture, of course. We also learn from our worship, from the beauty of nature, from one another, in our prayers. Sometimes there is another sort of surprising way, and that is an occasional movie that can open our minds and hearts to God in ways more powerful than we might imagine. When we see a movie strictly for entertainment, we've received our money's worth, but when we watch the story of some movies through the eyes of faith, God can touch us in ways that are worth much more, ways that are surprising, even transcendent. Every now and then, ordinary, commercial films become "Jesus movies."

For example, did any of you see the film, The Green Mile a number of years ago? If you have never seen it, I highly recommend it. It is sometimes hard to watch, but it is an incredible and powerful story. If we are looking for it, it doesn't take long to see who the Jesus figure is. He is John Coffey, an enormous black man in the old South who has been accused of murdering two small white

girls. After his totally unfair arrest and conviction, he is delivered to “the Green Mile,” the name of death row in a southern prison years ago. It becomes apparent fairly early in the film that John is innocent; he is sweet and gentle and what we used to call “simple-minded.” Despite his huge size, he weeps quietly at times and is afraid of the dark. He shows tenderness to everyone and tries to avoid the truly evil ones he encounters on the Green Mile. After a couple of miraculous healings, there’s no doubt in our eyes just who John Coffey represents. He is our Jesus figure in this movie.

In *The Green Mile*, one of several dramatic scenes shows us a gruesome execution, one in which a sadistic rookie guard deliberately omits a step in the electrocution procedure. The result is that the electric chair essentially cooks a Cajun inmate named Edouard Delacroix, a man whom John Coffey, and the movie’s viewers, have developed a fondness for. In one of the most graphic death scenes in cinematic history, as Del screams and jolts and jerks and smokes, John Coffey, in his own death row cell, experiences exactly the same torture. He jerks and grimaces as though he were sitting in “Old Sparky,” the electric chair, himself. The lights on the Green Mile dim, then burst, as he lives through Del’s electrocution from a distance.

After Del has finally died and has been removed for burial, the officer in charge of the Green Mile, Paul Edgecomb, played by Tom Hanks, returns to his block and walks to John’s cell. Sweat pours from John’s body; he is still trembling. He says to Edgecomb through clenched jaws, “Boss, Del, he the lucky one. He out of it now.” “Do you mean you heard that all the way down here, John?” asks Edgecomb? “No, Boss. I felt it,” replies John. John Coffey, our Jesus character, actually felt the pain of his friend. He experienced his torture, as though he himself had somehow been in the body of Edouard Delacroix. Com-passion. Feeling with, suffering with.

What is Jesus telling us? To go out and be do-gooders in the name of the church? No, not at all. Jesus is sending us out to do the work that springs from a heart filled with compassion, with empathy, with doing our best to experience another’s pain. We can never completely reach this ideal, of course; each person’s pain is unique. But the heart of the compassionate Christ, which is and must be our own corporate heart in the church, has no place for criticism, for judgment, or looking the other way. We reach out to those who need help, friend and stranger, not only those we deem worthy of our help. It is not our own help we offer, of course; we are merely the vehicles for Christ’s healing touch, his saving grace, his word of hope. We are being his physical Body on earth.

Last week I mentioned watching some squirrels in our back yard who caught my attention. It occurred to me that the reason they looked so free running up and down tree branches, scurrying around with pinenuts, and making cozy nests, is that they were being exactly who they were created to be, squirrels, and nothing else. Since you and I have been created in the image and likeness of God, and therefore of Jesus, our true nature, who we truly are, is compassionate people. Unlike those squirrels, we can choose not to live out of our true identity and to allow pride, fear, self-doubt, and the opinions of other people get in the way of our desire to live as God intended.

In Matthew 10:39 Jesus told us that in serving him we must lose ourselves to find ourselves. How exactly does that work, what does he mean? Think back to one of those times in your life when you were absorbed in helping someone who was hurting in some way. For that period of time, you were not even aware of yourself. You weren’t thinking about your own needs or wants or problems. In a sense you were lost by being compassionate. When we are being compassionate, we have set ourselves and our own needs aside in order to live for someone else.

So, in the Gospel today Jesus is simply calling upon us to be ourselves, people created with compassion for those in pain or need or trouble. When we do so, the world becomes just a little bit better. We do our imperfect best to help the Lord's Prayer come true, that God's will is being done an earth as it is in heaven. Amen