

Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 18, 2017
Sermon preached by the Rev. Daniel Vélez Rivera
Lessons: Genesis 1:1- 2:4^a, Psalm 8, 2 Corinthians 13:11-13, Matthew 28:16-20

If asked what Jesus means to you, you are likely to say something about his love and compassion. Once one's religious wisdom kicks in, one might mention the ways Jesus inspired people with hope, courage, determination, and inner strength. Love and compassion are intertwined, and in today's gospel from Matthew we are reminded of Christ's mission and ministry on behalf of the lost, the harassed, those pushed down, the sick, the misguided, and those in spiritual search. Out of loving compassion for the throngs of people who hungered for his teachings, Jesus turned to his disciples for help and he commissioned them to carry on his work. We heard how the Twelve were renamed, they would no longer be referred to as disciples, but Apostles because they would no longer be students but teachers, and representatives of Jesus Christ. The newly designated Apostles were commissioned to announce and to do God's business, a charge given to all Christians through Baptism.

That commission from Jesus gave the Apostles a reason for being. His way of compassion and love became their mantra: to serve the under-served and the unserved people. The mission of St. Gabriel's is no different than Christ's commission to his Apostles, we are called to, 'Encounter God, build meaningful relationships, and make a difference in the world". Saint Gabrielites embody that mission by not only serving the people around us, but, as many of you describe when you speak about this faith community, we live into our mission by being a loving, dependable and hospitable family to each other. That is perhaps the primary reason why we are part of this faith community and why you support the mission and ministries that reflect our identity as an authentically inclusive Christian community.

Over the past four years we have created and implemented guidelines to keep ourselves accountable to Christ and to one another. Those guidelines became a strategic plan which will expire in December of this year. Summer begins on Wednesday, and in a couple of weeks the wardens and I will work with Kurt Aschermann again on the 2018 strategic plan. Kurt volunteered to help us create and implement the current plan. With the vision and goals that we have identified, we have tried to keep our congregation mutually accountable to Christ and one another with goals and actions that align with the mission that Jesus gave his first Apostles. Our plan keeps us from doing less than we should or preventing us from doing more than we can handle. By the end of this summer, the Vestry will report on the accomplishments of the 2016-17 strategic plan and present to you the mission plan for 2018, which brings me back to today's Gospel lesson from Matthew.

In the story, Jesus told his apostles to go to the lost sheep and proclaim the Good News of Christ. Just as Jesus turned to his apostles, I turn to you. How can we go to the lost sheep and proclaim the Good News? Who are the lost sheep? What is our Good News? Well, you know the answer to the last question. In today's collect we prayed for God to pour unmeasurable and unceasing love into our hearts so that we can share the blessings of God's greatness with others. I think that sometimes we over-think our commission to love and serve with love and compassion as Christ did. My suggestion is not to worry too much about that. The 'how' will come to us because God, in God's infinite wisdom, gives us the authority and ability to serve others with loving compassion...our task is to respond. God doesn't call us to do something that God knows we cannot handle, just like Christ didn't give the apostles a task they couldn't handle. The question is, will we take the commission given by Jesus to give lovingly and compassionately to the unserved and to the under-served?

In the past couple months, I've been pondering ways in which Saint Gabriel's might reach out more effectively to those around us. I've been talking with the Vestry, Deacon Holly, Kurt and others about ways to reach out to those who do not yet know that St. Gabriel's will be their church home and to help them experience the love and compassion that you are familiar with. I believe that Christ is calling us to feed those who are very hungry and curious about their faith right here in Lansdowne, but don't know where to begin. Many of you might think you don't know much, but you do. For one, you continue seeking to be fed, you have found a church family, and more so, you continue coming back for more and you respond to the needs of others. But what about the people who don't know where to start? People who are intimidated to even ask questions of faith or who are overwhelmed by just looking at a Bible, not knowing where or how to begin. I believe that we are being called to figure out how to reach the "nones" among us, that is, the people who would respond to the question of religious affiliation with the word "none". It is not an easy task, but God doesn't call us to do something that God knows we cannot handle. We'll figure it out together. I believe that the outreach I'm referring to, helping the underserved or unserved figure out their core beliefs and feed their spiritual hunger with love and compassion is one of the main goals of our 2018 strategic plan. Feeding the hungry in spirit is what Jesus meant when he told his disciples to evangelize and share the Good News in the world.

How can we be better witnesses without scaring people or being scared ourselves? How can we participate in different ways that suit our lifestyles while reaching out to the spiritually hungry? God has given each of us different skills and talents. I invite you to think about ways to use yours and as we implement a new plan to open our doors wider for all to taste and see. Amen.