

July 21, 2024 Prpr 11 Something Different

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If you are someone who enjoys reading or watching stories with plenty of drama, eccentric characters, action, adventure, plot twists, and tragedy, you should try reading the Old Testament book Judges. It's not long, and it can be found between the books of Joshua and Ruth. In a brief summary, Judges follows the pattern of God's people praying to God for what they desire more than anything in the world: a king to rule over them. God's response to this request is to say no and insist the whole point of rescuing God's people from slavery in Egypt was to free them from oppression so they could worship God and represent God to all the people of the world, so all people could learn about and get to know God. But God's people didn't want to hear that. They didn't want to be different, they wanted a king, just like other nations. They believed having a king would make it easier to deal with people from other nations, perhaps make them equals in the eyes of other nations, and bring them things like peace, financial security, and status. In response, God tried to compromise and raised up or called individuals to serve as judges. This word is different from our modern definition of a judge. In the book Judges the term meant a ruler or leader, like a chieftain. Since there was no specified set of qualifications, each judge had their own personality and style, no two are alike.

What they all did have in common, with perhaps the exception of one, is they all failed to provide what the people and God wanted. Eventually they succumbed to a temptation or moral failing and showed they cared more about their own power and prestige than they cared about the people they were supposed to lead.

Scholars tell us the purpose of the book of Judges is to set up the deep need the people of God had for a king, and the process they followed before they finally got one. It also serves as a warning that human leadership – even that of a king - will not be able to save people the way God does, and when God promises to be the shepherd or leader for God's people, God means something very different from what we are accustomed to.

That something different is what God revealed in the person, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and is what today's Gospel points to when Jesus described the crowd of people chasing after him as sheep without a shepherd.

They were people with a king, King Herod, whose rule was entangled with the Roman government. As we heard last Sunday, Herod was not someone who had compassion for the people he ruled. And while the Roman government provided peace and prosperity for its subjects, there was a cost, and that cost was submitting to laws that took more than they gave, that prosperity was not for everyone, that women were prohibited from being equal citizens, and babies were literally thrown away if their fathers considered them defective. Anyone who dared to challenge Rome was severely punished or violently killed. That is how Rome kept peace. Many people in Jesus' day were sad and frustrated that their religion was being manipulated by Rome. And, while they had a king, they were not happy with a king who did not embody their faith.

So, when word got out about Jesus, perhaps from what the disciples said about him when they went out healing and teaching, it is understandable that so many people went looking for Jesus. And when Jesus saw all those people he recognized the age old issue of longing to be closer to God and filling that longing with anything and everything, like a king, except God.

In his book titled *Seculosity*, published in 2020, author David Zahl founder of Mockingbird Ministries, writes about this same phenomenon from his modern perspective of the things he believes have taken the place of God or salvation today. His book is a response to the observation of how culture is growing more secular. He argues society is not necessarily less religious, but that a variety of things such as food, politics, romance, parenting, work, science, causes, even fandoms have taken the place of

religion. Now, none of these things are bad in and of themselves and it is not a sin to enjoy good food, especially with good friends or family, or a good movie, or enjoy your spouse or children, or advocate for justice. The problem, as David Zahl explains, is when those things become the means for salvation; something they were never intended to be, by becoming a means to justify a person's status, value, or worth. For example, when what a person eats becomes a status symbol or a means to save them from disease or aging. This is not the same thing as eating a balanced diet or reducing the amount of carbs or sugar in your diet if you are a diabetic, like my husband. Food becomes religion when someone cares more about what the food they eat – or the places where they eat – says about them so that they can't really taste the food, appreciate it, or even delight in it. The same can be said for anything, when someone elevates it – whatever it is – into a way of making them feel worthy or even superior, then it becomes a religion.

In his book Zahl reminds us Paul wrote about this same phenomenon in his many letters, and it could be said this is what the author of the Gospel is expressing when Jesus recognized the crowd as sheep without a shepherd. It isn't that people were without leaders, but that no matter what people tried to fill what CS Lewis called that God shaped space inside them with: money, food, romance, family, politics, the latest gadgets, careers, exercise, never ending list of things to do, entertainment franchises, causes, they were ultimately disappointed.

This might be why Jesus felt compassion for the people in the crowds. Compassion is often mistaken for pity, but I don't believe Jesus felt sorry for anyone. I wonder if instead he felt a deep connection to them which is how American Buddhist nun Pema Chodron describes compassion. She writes, "compassion is not a relationship between healer and the wounded. It is a relationship between equals."

This is an important point, because when we read in today's Gospel that Jesus healed people, we have to be careful of poor theology that demeans people by thinking they need to be fixed. In her book *My Body is Not a Prayer Request*, scholar and theologian Amy Kenny warns that a body that requires a wheelchair does not indicate a lack of wholeness in mind, body, and soul. Sometimes all the surgeries, exercise, and diets can't make a body what *we* think it should be, but that doesn't mean a person is not whole, meaning the person has a relationship with God.

When Jesus healed people, it is possible what was happening was the restoration to wholeness by restoring their relationship with God and they realized they are loved by God. That God sees them, values them, loves them, just as God sees you, values you, and loves you. When we read Jesus is the true shepherd, what the Gospel writers are trying to articulate is that Jesus is fulfilling the promise God made way back in the book of Judges, that God and only God will be the shepherd, king or ruler of God's people. Jesus shows us God is not like any king we know from history or the Bible.

God isn't interested in accumulating wealth, power, or prestige or ruling over a land where people are dehumanized into a means to an end. God is a God of love, and one of the facets of God's love is compassion. Not looking down on someone for being different or making a mistake, but recognizing them as valuable and cherished parts of humanity.

It does not take much to recognize there is still a need for compassion today. As followers of Jesus, we are all called to embody as best we can the love of God in all aspects of our lives. And just like God's people back in the Old Testament, to do this we need to live differently. This does not mean we can't enjoy our families, communities, food, watch secular movies or read secular novels. According to former Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey, in order to truly live as God's people in the world we need to be in the world and learn from it. Learn how God is part of all it, how God can be and is present in places and people we might not imagine possible. According to Ramsey, to accomplish this we need to embrace being different. We won't be like everyone else, and that is okay. The different we need to embody is to be compassionate to all people – even those we don't agree with or don't like, by respecting

them, showing care without trying to fix, delighting in the joys of life, grieving with those who grieve, and remembering while there is much good on the earth, none of it can ever take the place of God's love. When we can live differently, people will notice, and some might want to come closer, to touch even the fringe of love emanating from such a compassionate life, and a few, without our ever knowing, might be touched by Christ, find wholeness in God's love, and pass it on. Compassion is the kind of different that can change the world.