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HISTORICAL SERIES, 1

One In Mission - A Compassionate Church

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(Editor's Note: This sermon was preached at the opening worship service of the first biennial Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada [ELCIC], 8 July 1987, in St. Joseph Roman Catholic Church, Ottawa, Ontario. The Rev. Donald W. Sjoberg, the first National Bishop of the ELCIC, served in that ministry from 1986 to 1993; prior to that he had been Bishop of the Western Canada Synod of the Lutheran Church in America from 1970 to 1985. The sermon takes up the theme of the Convention, "One in Mission"; the Convention subsequently gave approval for a Church-wide appeal for \$5 million, "Forward in Mission.")

Thank you, Archbishop Plourde, for your kind words and gracious welcome to St. Joseph Church. We are grateful for the hospitality shown to our Church as we gather for our opening worship service.

I am pleased that many of our ecumenical guests are with us this evening, reminding us of the many Christians with whom we are "one in mission."

Matthew 9:36-38. When (Jesus) saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest." (RSV)

We are to be compassionate as our Lord is compassionate. That compassion is clearly shown in the history of God's people. The poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger are named as those to whom compassion is to be shown. Jesus reaches out to those who have been shunted aside in society, and embraces the outcasts and alienated ones so as to bring them healing and help. That ministry is now entrusted to his followers. They are to bring to light the human conditions which cause separation as well as to announce God's dominion

breaking in to set things right.

Matthew Fox, in his book on compassion, quotes Thomas Aquinas who wrote: “Compassion is the fire which the Lord has come to send on earth.” It is this fire which we carry into the world as the baptized.¹

1. *The fire of compassion is to burn within us when we see human need.*

When Jesus saw the crowds he knew their needs from having visited with them, walked among them, eaten with them, heard their stories, laughed and wept with them. People were harassed and helpless, without leaders to champion the cause of the poor and oppressed.

Today we also see the face of human need through the eyes of others as they describe situations around the world. The media focus our attention on particular places, such as the famine in Ethiopia, and we do respond with our gifts to the relief efforts. But in the face of many similar disasters we often feel overwhelmed and helpless. The immensity of the problems and the complexity of finding solutions may cause us to despair. One person remarked to me, “It is all so depressing. Besides, I have my own worries and am barely able to cope with those.” Sometimes we would like to “pull down the blinds” and close our eyes to the problems. Missionary Barry Lange tells of being in a restaurant when two boys rubbed their noses against the window looking at the food. The waiter then came and pulled the blind, saying, “Don’t let them bother you. Enjoy your meal.” A group from Western Canada visiting Peru experienced the same in a restaurant in Cusco. But after seeing the hungry faces in the window there was no enjoyment of the meal.

We get used to the suffering and pain of others and they become a statistic or a part of the world’s landscape. We do not know their names or their personal stories. Avoidance is possible, but with avoidance something dies in us – something which makes us human: Compassion.

Thank God there are people who cry in outrage that it is not right that people should suffer preventable diseases, poverty, and malnutrition. Years ago Missionary Anne Beretta wrote from Peru about a young member of the congregation who had shown such great promise, but who died of tuberculosis. “There is absolutely no

reason,” she wrote, “why a young man should die of TB in this day of modern medicine.”

To see human need is also to see it as the result of sinfulness and the human condition whereby we are disconnected from one another. Compassion is not pity, for that can mean separating ourselves from those in need. Compassion is to suffer with, to be one in pain.

2. *The fire of compassion burns within us when we DO something in the face of human needs.*

To see the sufferings and only to feel sorry is to let the fire of compassion smoulder and die. Human needs must surely drive a Christian to God and an outburst of prayers. We pray “for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus, and for all people according to their needs” as part of each Sunday’s worship.² Did we ever think of such prayer as being a little “dangerous”? Jesus saw the need for more people to minister in the world and told his disciples to pray for more workers. God may tap us on the shoulder and point to something we are to do when we pray like that.

Doing something may be to learn about a specific situation, become part of a study group, or write letters to those in authority. Doing something may be to read the Scriptures with the help of those who are poor and work with the poor. So often we read the Bible from the perspective of the privileged.

Doing something always involves us where we are. “Rolling up your sleeves to work where you live” is the way Mother Teresa responded when people asked what they could do to help. At a commemorative service in Soweto, a young woman addressed the visitors from other countries: “Remember that compassion begins at home. Do not give us your sympathy, your help, unless, first of all, you work for justice and truth where you are. Do not give us your hypocrisy.”

Doing something enables us to see the relationship between faith and action, and to visualize compassion happening elsewhere. We gain confidence and courage from a variety of experiences in social actions and from contacts with others who strive for peace and justice. Thankfully, our Church participates with many ecumenical organizations in the work of advocacy and relief.

Of course, there are some times when all we can do is to entrust the needs to God. This was illustrated for me when I heard the

remarks of our tour guide at the Pieta in Rome. We looked at the statue of Mary holding the dead Christ. With her right arm Mary does the human thing, does what she can, which is to hold the lifeless form. But the other arm she extends as an offering and as prayer. That also is important because we are directed to God's promise and power.

3. *The fire of compassion burns within us when there is anticipation of God's presence and intervention.*

God champions the causes of people precisely when they are oppressed and estranged. Looking at the crowds Jesus sees a plentiful harvest. Those are words of hope. Compassion is born of hope; it rarely flows from despair. Cynical people speak of a harvest in terms of "reaping the whirlwind" – distrust, suspicion, anger, war, and violence. What can you expect from bad seeds? From seeds that have been sown over many generations causing strife and selfishness, destroying human communities?

The biblical picture of harvest comes with a promise of the "new thing" God is doing (Isaiah 43:19). "May those who sow in tears reap with songs of joy" (Psalm 126:5). The kind of harvest described in Galatians is the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control" (5:22).

My childhood recollections of harvesting are of happy times as neighbours came together to thresh the grain. (I grew up on a farm north of Clanwilliam, Manitoba.) I enjoyed the liveliness and laughter with which the harvest was gathered. The common task involved hard work but it was done with joy, playfulness and laughter. Grimness does not make a good reaper. For the hungry threshing crew there was food – lots of it. There was noon dinner, afternoon lunch, and a huge supper at the end of the day, all prepared and served by my hard-working mother. Eating well resulted in a happy and hard-working crew.

Jesus sees the needs of the people as a harvest which has to be gathered through hard work and cooperation.

This evening after a long and perhaps tiresome day we come to the Holy Meal. We come with our own concerns as well as knowing of the burdens of others. Tonight we are among the Lord's harvesting labourers sharing a common mission to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and to serve the needs of all God's people. We come to

be nourished and renewed in our love, faith, and hope. Fed with the one heavenly food we glimpse God's banqueting table in which no one need go hungry or be alienated from the community. Once more we may go forth in the peace of the Lord to be compassionate people.

Thomas Aquinas's words ring out: *Compassion is the fire the lord has come to send on earth*. May we go with that fire! May our Church be One in Mission!

Notes

- ¹ Matthew Fox. *A Spirituality Named Compassion and the Healing of the Global Village, Humpty Dumpty and Us* (Winston Press, 1979), Preface, vi.
- ² The invitation to common prayer in the liturgy of Holy Communion, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), 65 *et passim*.