

As many of you know, I had the absolute joy and privilege of serving as the pastor on site at Luther Point Bible Camp last week. It was a week filled with beautiful weather, fun games, playing, kids' laughter, gifted staff members, and learning about Jesus in ways that camp uniquely provides. My main role last week was being a chaplain and pastoral presence for the staff, who were doing an incredible job of loving these campers in the name of Jesus. But it was the middle of their work summer, after a long and hard year of plans drastically changing and life opportunities being limited for many of them, and they were starting to get pretty tired and burnt out. Many of them told me stories of personal and professional struggles and just not being entirely sure what the future held for them. My heart broke for these wonderful, talented, energetic, Christ-filled (even younger than me) people, and prayed with them that God would hold them close and help to guide them into what the next best step would be. They are so tired and overwhelmed it's hard for them to discern where God may be calling them next.

As I listened to these stories from these dear camp staff members, this week's Gospel and Psalm texts came to mind in powerful ways. As we heard in the Gospel, the great crowd of people were wandering, searching, yearning for the healing and ministry that Jesus and his disciples provided - they were like sheep without a shepherd. They surely needed help and guidance and care for what the future might bring them, including the desperate desire for hope. Even the hope of a tiny motion, the touching of the hem of Jesus' cloak, was enough to keep them going and seeking out Jesus and His incredible healing power. The deep needs and desires of the camp staff felt like the deep needs and desires of these sheep in need of a shepherd.

Though of course much has changed since the time of Jesus and his disciples, there are some core elements of being human that do not change over time. The need for hope, the need for purpose, the need for community, the need for rest and food, the need for healing, the need for Jesus in our lives.

I think many of us here can relate to these deep needs experienced both by the disciples and the people, the sheep, searching and desperately needing the guidance and healing power of our good shepherd, Jesus Christ. So many of us are experiencing burnout this year, from all the things that we never expected or asked for, and yet were still asked to show up, long quarantined day after long quarantined day. We are desperate for hope. We are desperate for healing, not only for our own minds and bodies and spirits, but healing for our communities too. We sense a deep need and desire to come back together and truly know and be known by one another that can only happen in a commitment to showing up for one another. And it is only by the leadership and the power of the one who comes to us in love that we can make this healing happen.

One of the greatest things about the way we are able to follow Jesus' leadership, especially as it's presented in this story, is that Jesus simply meets us where we are. He is not going out to actively recruit people (he already has his faithful disciples at this point) - but because of his actions of healing and teaching and preaching, the people in Gennesaret and the surrounding areas already know what Jesus is about and seek him out for that healing. And so Jesus still meets us where we are too - Jesus never shames the sheep for having need of the shepherd, but instead encourages and provides what the sheep need to live and thrive. Jesus meets them with deep compassion.

In Psalm 23 we hear in the opening, classic words that God is my shepherd, and I shall not be in want. We hear that God makes us lie down in green pastures, beside still waters, to restore our souls. Jesus, being fully human and fully divine, the Son of God, knows what these guiding and healing actions are for us as humans too. Sometimes our greatest healing doesn't have to be so complicated - we simply need to rest, to eat, to drink water, and know that our needs will be met, that we will be cared for, that we are never truly alone. These actions are what Jesus encourages for his disciples, who are doing hard and holy work, healing and teaching and loving people in the name of Jesus Christ. He encourages them to take a

moment away, rest and recharge and take care of themselves, so that they can come back and continue the good work of ministry.

When you think of your own struggles, your own hardships, in what way do you need the most healing? What would healing mean and look like for you in this season?

Perhaps just taking a moment to close your eyes, take a deep breath, connect yourself back to the Spirit and your beloved createdness, will help you to know what healing with Jesus could mean and look like and feel like at this point. Perhaps it's rest and time away and having a trusted friend help you out from time to time, just as Jesus did and encouraged for the disciples. Perhaps it's taking an intentional moment simply to pray and reconnect to the God who created and loves you. Perhaps it's getting re-energized for the work you are called to, reaching out to someone you miss, filling your cup with the very real hope that is coming with this season of the pandemic nearing its end. Perhaps it's meeting someone with compassion, rather than meeting them with judgment or criticism, guided by the ways of Jesus. Perhaps it's reconnecting with the promises made in baptism, the promises that guide us in our life of faith our whole lives long, that we daily die and rise in the promises of new life given to us by Christ Jesus. Do not be afraid of naming what you need, dear friends, because God meets us even in our moments of most desperate need. God meets us with compassion, with love that defeated even death and the grave to hold us closely and know that there will always be new life for us, even when we are seated in the presence of enemies. God has called us very good from even the beginning of time, God's goodness and mercy will follow us our whole lives long.

I pray, dear friends, that you find what you need in the loving care of Christ Jesus. That you know you are worthy of the healing power of Sabbath rest, worthy of love from God our creator and Jesus our Savior, and having your needs met just as you are, without shame for needing guidance and care, just as we all do. That you will have the good courage to reach out and do what you need to do to bring about that healing you so desperately need.

Jesus meets us where we are, even in our darkest valleys and hardest struggles, and thanks be to God, shepherds us into hope and new life each and every day. Thanks be to God, Amen.