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**11<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY "A" 2008 JUNE 15, 2008**

**FR. JOE SOBIERAJSKI, S.J.**

**EXODUS 19:2-6A ROMANS 5:6-11**

**MATTHEW 9:36-10:8**

In our own day "compassion" has come to mean sympathy or sorrow for the distress of another with the desire to help. At its root, however, "compassion" means "to suffer with" giving it a far more significance both as a human and divine virtue. To be "compassionate" means to willingly enter into the suffering, the sorrow, the pain of another human being so that they suffer not alone but with the support of one who knows what they endure.

In our reading from the Gospel of Matthew this morning, we are told that Jesus looked at the people gathered before Him, and His "heart was moved with compassion for them because they were lost and abandoned like sheep without a shepherd." Who did Jesus see in this crowd before Him? Men, women and children like you and me? Certainly, people who tried to be true to God and His commandments but who are sinners never the less. He certainly saw people who suffered from physical illness: the lame, the blind, the leper, people whose illness set them apart. He saw the tax collector, the prostitute, the thief, as well as men and women whose attachment to their Jewish faith was far less than strong. He saw the righteous: the Pharisees, the Scribes, the Sadducees who thought they were guaranteed salvation. But more than just seeing these men and women, He felt their need, their separation, their desire to somehow share in the love of God which they desperately needed. Experiencing what they experienced, He also was aware of the mission for whom He came into the world: to reconcile all men and women to the Father. He had come to be the conduit that shared both in the life of human kind and the divine life of the Father, and could bring them together because He knew both. How He went about doing that is a story that we all know and celebrate during Holy Week and Easter. But, in addition to His own Death and Resurrection, He was aware even at this early stage of His public life, that He needed the cooperation of those whose faces He saw in the crowd if people were ever to know the Good News.

His initial response seems underwhelming: twelve men, Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, James, Thomas, Matthew, Thaddeus, Simon, and Judas. These were not men of power, nor were they educated. They were not obvious choices for leadership. They were sinners and some of them obviously so. Perhaps, that is why Jesus chose them. As sinners they too could feel compassion for those faces in the crowd. They knew what it was like to be less than whole, to be isolated, and even perhaps unloved. They also knew what it meant to be accepted by

Jesus in spite of all that seemed irregular about them. They became the first, though few in number, to bring the compassion of God to the men and women of Israel—the lost sheep.

In Luke's Gospel (6:36) we are told, "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate." In our First Reading from *Exodus* we learn something about the compassion of Yahweh. Slaves in Egypt and far away from the land promised to their father Abraham, the people of Israel like sheep without a shepherd. Yahweh, however, understands their pain and their suffering, and sends them a man, a prophet, a leader who will give them the direction they need. Moses is the sign of God's compassion for His people, and now that He has led them from slavery, He proposes an eternal covenant of that compassion and love. "You have seen for yourself how I treated the Egyptians and how I bore you up on eagle wings and brought you here to myself...hearken to My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My special possession, dearer to Me than all other people." There is a call here to a union --a being "with" God as God is "with" us which is implicit in God's compassion. That compassion makes the people of Israel aware, and we too by extension, of something they were unaware of before: they are joined to God in a covenant of fidelity. The fidelity to which God will always be true can only be broken by their or our infidelity. More than that, as a kingdom of priests, as a Holy Nation we are called to invite others, to invite all into the compassion of God, invites all to become His people.

In his *Letter to the Romans* this morning Paul tries to make it clear to us that the compassion of God is most fully exercised in the fact that He sent His son to die for the ungodly. God's love is all embracing, and like the Father, the Son's love reconciles friend and foe, the good and the bad, the Jew and the Gentile, all men and women to God's faithful love.

The unquestionable fact of that love leads us like the Chosen People at Mount Sinai or the Apostles in today's Gospel with a choice. Do we accept God's compassionate love for us, and thereby become instruments of His love in our world, or do we reject that love and compassion choosing to turn our backs on the power that love can exercise in our lives?

On the surface it seems an easy choice. Why would I possibly reject such a love? It seems that I have everything to gain and nothing to lose. But, we all know that nothing is as black and white as it sometimes seems. Our lives, each of our lives, are muddied and shadowed. To accept God's love and to become His willing instruments means that we put ourselves in His hands. To do that means that we willingly give up control, and we all know how much we want to control everything and anything. To accept God's compassionate love means that we must search our own hearts, and try to understand why those muddied and shadowed areas of our life seem to offer us so much comfort. To accept the compassionate love of God is to admit to God that we need Him, and that our lives are incomplete without that love.

Most of us as human beings pride ourselves on our independence and self-sufficiency. And although I might right now be the envy of every eight-year-old in the Parish because of my scooter, the last few weeks have taught me yet again how much I want to be in control. While my scooter helps it certainly does not allow me to do everything I want to do. And when I can't do what I want to do then I have to allow someone else to do something for me. How that irks me! Being dependent seems to go against my entire nature as a human being, and yet being dependent on God is an absolute necessity if I am to be the Christian I claim to be and want to be.

To accept God's compassion, to accept the compassion of my brothers and sisters is humbling and yet freeing. Henri Nouwen put it this way:

JESUS' COMPASSION IS CHARACTERIZED BY A DOWNWARD PULL. THAT IS WHAT DISTURBS US. WE CANNOT EVEN THINK ABOUT OURSELVES IN TERMS OTHER THAN THOSE OF AN UPWARD PULL, AND UPWARD MOBILITY IN WHICH WE STRIVE FOR BETTER LIVES, HIGHER SALARIES, AND MORE PRESTIGIOUS POSITIONS. THUS, WE ARE DEEPLY DISTURBED BY A GOD WHO EMBODIES A DOWNWARD MOVEMENT. INSTEAD OF STRIVING FOR HIGHER POSITION, MORE POWER, AND MORE INFLUENCE, JESUS MOVES, AS KARL BARTH SAYS, FROM "THE HEIGHTS TO THE DEPTHS, FROM VICTORY TO DEFEAT, FROM RICHES TO POVERTY, FROM TRIUMPH TO SUFFERING, FROM LIFE TO DEATH."

JESUS' WHOLE LIFE AND MISSION INVOLVE ACCEPTING POWERLESSNESS AND REVEALING IN THIS POWERLESSNESS THE LIMITLESSNESS OF GOD'S LOVE. HERE WE SEE WHAT COMPASSION MEANS. IT IS NOT A BENDING TOWARD THE UNDERPRIVILEGED FROM A PRIVILEGED POSITION; IT IS NOT A GESTURE OF SYMPATHY OR PITY FOR THOSE WHO FAIL TO MAKE IT IN THE UPWARD PULL. ON THE CONTRARY, COMPASSION MEANS GOING DIRECTLY TO THOSE PEOPLE AND PLACES WHERE SUFFERING IS MOST ACUTE AND BUILDING A HOME THERE. GOD'S COMPASSION IS TOTAL, ABSOLUTE, UNCONDITIONAL, WITHOUT RESERVATION.

(COMPASSION, HENRI NOWUEN, ET AL)

That is our God, a God of compassion, a compassion to which we too are called.