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**Sunday 18 June 2023 to Sunday 25 June 2023**

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Sunday 18 June 2023

**Working with the home crowd**

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

***As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near’ (Matthew 10:7).***

Read Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

Jesus is on a roll! Crowds of people are coming to hear Jesus speak as he moves around the towns and villages. Jesus has a real heart for the people who are harassed and helpless. Do you know that harassed and helpless feeling? I certainly do! Wouldn’t it be wonderful to bump into Jesus as he travels around – to hear him preach and teach? Or even to have him heal you and take away those feelings of harassment and helplessness? That would be fantastic!

As Jesus moved about, he felt compassion for those feeling harassed and helpless. We can easily start there. Compassion means having pity that leads us to be merciful or helpful. Instead of sitting in judgement or walking by, Jesus wants us to pause and see how we can help – which may not be so easy after all.

Not only is Jesus conducting that ministry, but he also empowers his disciples to share it. They are sent out to do Jesus-style ministry among ‘the lost sheep of Israel’ – to start with the home crowd. Jesus tells them there is a plentiful harvest and a shortage of workers. Doesn’t that sound familiar?

I wonder what Jesus is telling us today. Should we also be going out to our home crowd to share the good news of Jesus with them? And if we were to do that, who would our home crowd be?

It sometimes feels like I am the lost sheep – the crowd seems to have already moved on from the church and its beliefs and values. Jesus’ message that the twelve disciples were to share is very clear: The kingdom of God has come near. It is up to you and me to share that message within our home crowd. And the good news is that the Holy Spirit can use our words and actions to touch people, draw them closer to God and bask in the awareness that God’s kingdom is near.

***Loving Jesus, thank you for your compassion and healing. Come into my heart and take away my feelings of helplessness and worry. Help me to be compassionate and give me the right words to tell my home crowd that the kingdom of heaven is near, trusting you to help them to understand and come to believe that too. Amen.***

*Colleen Fitzpatrick is a mother of two, grandmother of three and godmother of four. She is allegedly retired and lives in Adelaide. Colleen trained as a social worker, and after working in the foster care program at Lutheran Community Care in South Australia, she became the director and served in that role for 13 years. Colleen serves on a number of boards and committees within the LCA and the wider community.*

Monday 19 June 2023

**A full life**

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

***I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full (John 10:10b).***

Read John 10:1–18

Today’s text is very evocative to me. I have written previously about my memories of my father feeding his sheep: emptying a bag of wheat as he walked along and the sheep queueing up behind him, eating the good grain. My dad loved his sheep and looked after them, ensuring they weren’t fly-blown and didn’t have footrot. The lambs who were weak, rejected or could not be not cared for by their mothers were brought home and fed and nurtured until they could return to the flock. In lambing season, he would go around the flocks of sheep daily, checking that all was well.

This passage stresses the importance of the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep. It is only when the sheep know and recognise the shepherd that they will follow. The shepherd places the sheep at the centre of their life – they will even lay down their life for the sheep.

There is also a strong message of unity – the inclusion of the sheep that are not from this flock. They come together, and one flock is formed by the shepherd. We are reassured that Jesus chose to lay down his life of his own accord – and in doing that, he followed the command of his Father.

What an amazing and generous act on behalf of Jesus, our shepherd. Surely we can respond in kind and with a generous heart. We can put our lives in Jesus’ loving hands and trust we will find that abundance of good things. We have been given so much; what can we give back to our community, friends, family or church? Let’s take time to listen to the voice of our good shepherd calling us to be the people we have been created to be, working for the good of others with servant hearts that give God the glory and rejoice in knowing that we are following the good shepherd into a place of safety and peace.

**Good Shepherd, thank you for calling me and leading me through life. Help me trust that you are watching over me and guarding and protecting me, even in the wilderness times. Amen.**

Tuesday 20 June 2023

**No snatching!**

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

***I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one will snatch them out of my hand (John 10:28).***

Read John 10:19–42

We become part of Jesus’ flock by being baptised. Many of us cannot remember our baptism, given that it is customary in our Lutheran tradition to be baptised as a baby. It is worth revisiting the significance of that action and acknowledging its lifelong status.

We are baptised ‘in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’. Being baptised has been likened to being adopted. I worked as an adoptions social worker in South Australia for several years. During that time, I was privileged to witness all aspects of the process, including the grief of relinquishing parents, the sadness of people who are unable to conceive a child, the joy that the placement of a baby or child brings to a family, and for some adoptees, the importance of knowing who they are and why they were adopted. I also know that being adopted does not change who your birth/biological parents are. The act of adoption makes the adoptees the legal parents of a child and gives them all the duties and rights of a parent.

As baptised children of God, we have been received into the church and become part of God’s family. It’s a permanent arrangement. Jesus claims us as his sheep and promises that no-one can take us away. The Parable of the Lost Sheep highlights the importance of each of us to the Good Shepherd. No matter what we say or do, we are still precious to him – no-one can snatch us out of the hand of the Good Shepherd.

Those of us who are godparents have the gift of that special relationship with our godchildren and a responsibility to encourage them in their faith journey. That does not end with a baptismal celebration or even at confirmation. I believe it is a lifelong relationship. What do you think?

**Good and steadfast Shepherd, thank you for never giving up on us. Thank you for the gift of baptism and of godparents and godchildren. Help us to be faithful to the promises we made at our baptism and those of our godchildren. Amen.**

Wednesday 21 June 2023

**No need for a genie**

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

***But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask (John 11:22).***

Read John 11:1–27

Remember the fairy stories and legends in which an opportunity was given to ask for anything, and the wish would be granted? Sometimes the asker would get more than they bargained for, and salutary lessons needed to be learned. One of the best-known of these stories is the tale of Aladdin and his magic lantern. Rubbing the magic lantern caused a genie to appear, and the genie would grant three wishes.

Accessing God and his promises does not need a magic lantern or a genie. God is always there for us, no matter what is happening around us.

In today’s reading, we once again meet Martha and Mary. They have sent word to Jesus that their brother is ill. We know that Jesus loved this family, but we don’t know whether they thought that Jesus would heal Lazarus or whether they thought that Jesus might want to say a last goodbye to him.

Maybe you have experienced that time after the death of someone close to you when people come to pay their last respects and offer comfort. So it was with Mary and Martha. They had a full house. However, when Martha hears that Jesus is on his way, she runs out to meet him and states her belief that Jesus is the Messiah and that God will give Jesus whatever he asks for.

May Martha’s faith be an example and inspiration to you. When things aren’t going well, our God is still there, watching over us, caring for us, and waiting for us to come with our requests and hopes. The burden may not magically disappear, but the way forward will be eased, and we can be prepared for some surprises on the way.

The idea of a yoke to share a load – such as pioneering women carrying produce from Hahndorf in the Adelaide Hills into town or when animals were yoked together to allow heavier work to be undertaken – is less familiar these days. The promise of Matthew 11:28–30 holds good despite the old-fashioned reference: ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.’

It provides comfort when there is no magic lantern or genie to grant us our wishes!

**Comforting God, thank you that you are always there for us and that you promise to give us rest. Help us hand our problems over to you in confidence, knowing that you hear and answer every single one of our prayers. Amen.**

Thursday 22 June 2023

**Believe and see the glory**

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

***Then Jesus said, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?’ (John 11:40).***

Read John 11:28–44

Grief and loss are complicated concepts. You can’t plan or predict how you will react when faced with a significant loss. I have heard grief described as a storm, with symptoms such as a fog of thoughts (a head that is ‘foggy’ and vague, vivid dreams, confusion, hallucinations), winds of behaviour (not being able to concentrate, eat or sleep, feeling agitated), and waves of emotion (feeling overwhelmed, panicked, shocked, relieved, numb, angry …).

It can be hard to respond to someone who is grieving. You may wonder what you can say to give comfort. Just a hint: telling your own story will not ease someone else’s pain. It’s much better to acknowledge that it is difficult to find words. A hug can be a good thing if you know the person well. It’s a good idea to ask first if it’s okay to hug someone. Even holding a hand can be a good thing.

Martha and Mary were grieving for their brother, who had died four days previously. Their grief would still have been raw. They had let Jesus know Lazarus was dying, and it must have seemed to them that Jesus had ignored them.

When Jesus turns up, is Mary telling him off for not arriving before Lazarus died – acknowledging that Jesus could have healed him? Jesus was deeply moved by the outpouring of grief from Mary and her companions.

And then he wept.

Why did Jesus weep? Is it because his friend has died? Is it because people have so little faith? Is he just tired? There are so many unanswered questions in this story.

Whatever the cause, it is written twice that Jesus was deeply moved. He was, after all, fully human and fully divine. We see Jesus’ humanity in his compassion for Mary and Martha and his emotional response to Lazarus’ death. What a precious insight into this aspect of Jesus.

Jesus’ divinity shines through when he calls Lazarus by name, and Lazarus emerges from the tomb. Maybe Lazarus’ name is no accident. It means ‘God will help’. God responded to Jesus’ call and helped in the best way possible for Mary and Martha and, of course, Lazarus at that time.

The glory of God was made clear through Jesus’ words. If we believe in God’s promises and continue to trust, God’s glory will be revealed to you and me also.

**Faithful God, thank you for the gift of emotions and feelings. Thank you for sharing our humanity and experiencing grief and joy during your time on earth. Thank you for the comfort of family and friends who journey with us. Thank you for the promise that God will help. Amen.**

Friday 23 June 2023

**Finding our prophetic voice**

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

***He prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one (John 11:51b,52).***

Read John 11:45–57

Have you heard any good prophecies lately?

What is a prophecy? Traditionally, it was a foretelling of the future inspired by God. It is listed as one of the fruits of the Spirit. These days, when we hear talk about the future – of climate change leading to disaster, threats to national security, and war – there is not a lot of good news. However, Caiaphas had some good news: ‘Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one’.

Of course, Caiaphas was the high priest who sent Jesus to Pontius Pilate before the crucifixion. God used Caiaphas’ voice to foretell Jesus' death and the impact that would have on the Jewish nation and beyond.

A prophetic voice is not only one that foretells the future – it is also about speaking the truth about what is happening in the present. I believe that it is important that the church (ie all Christian churches) uses its prophetic voice to speak out about injustice and wrongs present in our world today.

Within the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand, we have a formal process for this through the Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions that speaks into the church on such matters as earth care, domestic violence and refugees. It is not unusual for our church to combine with other churches on these matters and take a public stand about them. And, of course, there are the aged care and community services that support and advocate for people who are vulnerable and unable to make their own voices heard.

Given the abundant life that God has given us, surely we can generously share with others. During my time as director of Lutheran Community Care in South Australia, it was immensely humbling to see the generous way that people supported our work. We were blessed to receive donations from many people. The most precious was from those who had little but were prepared to share with us perhaps more than they could afford, knowing that God would continue to meet their needs.

**God of the past, present and future, thank you for those who prophesy – particularly those who do so in a way that brings glory to you. Help us to be a prophetic voice in our community, speaking out against injustice and for those who are vulnerable and oppressed. Amen.**

Saturday 24 June 2023

**Are you listening, God?**

by Colleen Fitzpatrick

***Answer me quickly, for I am in trouble (Psalm 69:17b).***

Read Psalm 69:7–10, (11–15)16–18

In 1963, Jimmy Little recorded a song called ‘The Royal Telephone’. The words of the chorus are:

Telephone to glory, oh, what joy divine!
I can feel the current moving on the line.
Made by God the Father for his very own,
You may talk to Jesus on this royal telephone.\*

It’s a nice image, isn’t it? I remember back then picturing Jesus at the ready, waiting for that royal telephone to ring so he could pick it up, listen to whatever I had to say, and then he’d get busy fixing whatever was bothering me at the time.

How blessed we are to be able to talk to God any time, any day, anywhere, in any language or in no language. We don’t even have to formulate words.

I love to pray. It’s so good to be able to share whatever is on my heart and know that my heartaches and joys are shared – that someone cares about what is happening to me and that someone is bigger than me or anything that can happen to me.

How do we know our prayers have been answered? It’s not as if God sends an answer via a messenger angel. Sometimes, prayers are answered in an obvious manner – the cure of a disease or the easing of a situation. Sometimes, the answer comes from friends or strangers reaching out with words of comfort or wisdom. At other times, it may be a sense of inner peace, comfort and strength that enables us to keep going, knowing that we are not alone.

We have a prayer group at my church – actually, it is two: an online group and an in-person group. Prayer requests are shared, and it is wonderful to know that we’re not alone in taking these requests to our gracious, generous, attentive God. I also like that I can ask people if it’s okay for my prayer group to pray for them. No-one has said no to that request. It’s easy to say, ‘I’m off to my prayer group. Do you have any requests?’ And often, they do.

And back to that royal telephone. Maybe, it is an even better metaphor for our prayers now, given the constant presence of our phones, the information they contain, and the control they have over our lives. May your prayers provide the comfort and strength you need today and every day – you can pray even when you’ve left your phone at home!

**Patient God, thank you for always hearing and answering our prayers. Thank you for the surprises you provide. Help us to be patient when things don’t turn out as we hope and plan and trust that all things will work together for our good – no matter what happens. Amen.**

\*Frederick M Lehmann (1868–1953), ‘The Royal Telephone’ (public domain), made popular in Australia by Jimmy Little

Sunday 25 June 2023

**What are you worth?**

by Pastor Mark Gierus

***Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows (Matthew 10:29,31).***

Read Matthew 10:24–39

Have you ever felt that you don’t have any value in life? Maybe you are going through a rough patch. Or perhaps you are going well but feel like some people take you for granted. Have you stopped recently to ask yourself what you are worth?

The world we live in, with so much pressure to have it all together and be positive in every situation, can be a tough place just to exist. There are expectations, and then there is the judgement from others – and even yourself – when you don’t get through your to-do list each day. The world and its people can make you feel that you are only worth what you can give them. If you can do or give something, you are valuable to someone or even your workplace or retirement space. It seems that the more you do and give of yourself, the world tells you that makes you more valuable than when you are not giving or doing as much.

Yet, you are made in the image of God. You are loved by the God who created the universe and created you. Not loved from a distance but loved through the suffering and death of God’s only Son, Jesus. The love of God poured out on the cross at Calvary through Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. Jesus died so you might have life and have it to the full. Not in the prosperity sense but a life filled with God’s love, grace and mercy – a life that fills you with joy and hope, a life that is new.

God, our Heavenly Father, loves you so much. He reminds you that you are so valuable that he gave up his Son so you could be set free and receive eternal life in him. Even the sparrows, seen as not so valuable in a monetary sense, are cared for by God.

Do not be afraid. Are you not worth more and more valuable than the sparrows whom God cares for? Know that God loves you. He cares for you, and you are worth so much to him. He showed this when he sent Jesus to save you and fill you with his love.

**Heavenly Father, help me remember that you made me and rescued me from sin, death and the power of the devil through your only Son, Jesus. Help me know that I am valuable, not because I say to the world that I am, but because you declare to the world that I am. You love me and care for me. May I always remember you gave yourself for me because you say I’m worth it and because of your abundant grace. Amen.**

Pastor Mark Gierus currently serves as a Lutheran pastor in Redcliffe, Queensland. He has three beautiful girls aged 7, 10 and 19 and enjoys hiking with them, looking after their pets as a family and going on road trips. Mark prays that God will continue to bless you as you grow in him and come to know him more and more through his life-giving eternal word.