

**Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, July 22, 2018.**

As you might have noticed, I like to give Sundays a name. Recent examples are *Straight Talk Sunday* and *Common Sense Sunday*. I don't do it all the time, but sometimes the lessons cry out "Summarize Us!" Such is the case today. Let's think about this Sunday as *Relief Sunday*.

By "relief," I mean simply that I, and I hope you, feel better after reading these lessons. I know that I am relieved. Take the Jeremiah passage (**Jeremiah 23:1-6**). Jeremiah is pretty tough on shepherds who fail to do their job. "It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doing." Ouch. But then Jeremiah goes on to assure the flock that all will be well. The Lord says, "But I will bring them back, those who suffered from the evil shepherd, to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply."

Clergy often think of themselves as shepherds (**Psalms 23**), so we take this passage personally. The thought of not attending our flock is disturbing, especially if it's true. Well, what a relief to know that, if we fail our flock, God will rescue the flock, and the flock will be fruitful and multiply.

Now, the shepherd imagery can apply to anyone, any group of people, with a responsibility to care for others. Parents, bosses, elected leaders, public safety officials, friends, neighbors, children, ourselves. Pick your category. All of us, whatever our shepherd identity, have the potential to fail our flock. What a relief therefore to know that God will step in, either directly or through another shepherd. One of God's greatest self-directives is to rescue those who are lost. This is relief on a cosmic scale. And it is a relief on a very personal scale.

St. Paul in his letter to the early Christians in Ephesus (**Ephesians 2:11-22**) reminds us that God's Instrument of Relief, for us as individuals, and for us as a people, is Jesus Christ. "But now in Christ Jesus you, who once were far off, have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace in his flesh, he has made both groups into one, and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

The hostility that you and I feel is sometimes between us and others, and other times between us and ourselves. We know what the world should be like, and often it is not. And we know what we should be like, and often we are not.

Imagine this reality without an Instrument of Relief. What if we, individually and collectively, were left to our own devices. It's not a pretty sight!

And what we need to remember is that there is nothing automatic about a remedy for this condition. Who is going to restore the prettiness to the sight? Who is going to confront the ugliness and transform it for the Good? An Instrument of Relief is a conscious, deliberate effort. Somebody has to get up off the self-destructive mat, and make things better. That's what God does in Jesus Christ, and that's what God does in our better moments.

What a relief to know that God loves us so much that He will himself, as a human being, die on a cross and on the third day rise from the dead. Undeserved mercy. That's who Christ is. A second chance and a third chance and multiple chances, all because God doesn't want to leave us to our own devices. For, if He does, we will get ourselves in trouble, trouble so profound that we won't be able to extricate ourselves from a Dead End. In Christ, however, there is a New Beginning. "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone."

Today's gospel (**Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**) is also about relief. The disciples need a break. They have been working hard at the direction of Jesus, but they are tired. Being the good boss that he is, Jesus says, "You know what. You have been working hard. Let's take a break. "Come away with me to a deserted place, and rest awhile." And so they do.

But, as often happens, rest-breaks get interrupted. News of the good work the apostles had been doing – the teaching and the healing – was circulating. And there were people at the rest-break who recognized the disciples. The word was out, and soon people "hurried on foot from all the towns" to see the disciples and their Master. The people "laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged Jesus that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak." No rest for the disciples. No rest for Jesus.

But, a good outcome. "All who touched the fringe of his cloak were healed." What a relief for those healed. And what a relief for the tired disciples. They were reassured that this Jesus really was worth the sacrifices they were making. When you and I are exhausted, aren't we are relieved when there is a payoff for the exhaustion? This passage is not just about Jesus or just about the disciples. This

passage is about you and me. In sharing in the healing of others, we are healed. What a relief!

The theme of “what a relief” is sometimes attributed to Speedy, the mascot for Alka-Seltzer. Which made me think that maybe there is a relationship between discipleship and carbonation. After all, in the Gospel passage, the disciples are feeling flat. They are tired. They are exhausted. They are spent. They are all out of pizzazz.

What they thought they needed was a rest, an escape, a relief from responsibility. We know that feeling. Well, what they discovered was that their renewed energy didn’t necessarily come from escape. In this episode, renewal came from more engagement, not less. Not engagement the disciples felt they needed. But engagement that those in need felt they needed.

We know that feeling too, don’t we? In fact, to realize that there is more energy in our physical and mental and spiritual tank than we realize is a relief in itself. We’re better than we think. We can do more than we think. We can recover faster than we think. There are people who need us more than we need them. Oh, my God, there is more to us than we think! What a relief!

And isn’t it true that this is what we preach to our children and grandchildren. Don’t get down on yourself. Keep plugging. Keep doing what you know you should be doing. Things will come around. They really will. You’re stronger than you think are. Stay with it.

And when that turn-around happens, what a relief it is for those children and grandchildren, and what a relief it is for you and me who have been championing their cause, and what a relief it is for those who have benefited from their perseverance.

*Relief Sunday.* That’s what today is. But remember that such days are not automatic. Someone has to get up off his or her self-destructive, woe is me mat, and engage the enemy. God does this in Jesus. Jesus does this in his birth, life, death and resurrection. We do this in the Name of Jesus. And maybe the people who are helped, those who are healed, become healers themselves. Everybody perseveres. And the world, of course, is better for it. And, “O what a relief that is.”

Amen.

