

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 18—Year B
Isaiah 35:4-7a
Psalm 146
James 2:1-10, [11-13], 14-17
Mark 7:24-37

Here we are on a **long Labor Day weekend**, kind of the unofficial closing of the summer season. I hope you are finding time to **rest, breathe, and relax** this weekend because it's **hard out there in the world** right now.

I came back from vacation time this past Tuesday. As I checked into the headlines, there were stories about **Hurricane Ida ravaging the Louisiana coast**, followed by **catastrophic flooding later in the week in the Northeast**. **Wildfires** continue to sweep across **the west**. August saw **devastating and deadly flash floods** in Tennessee and in **western North Carolina**, just down the road from Lake Logan. All of these weather events made **much more extreme by climate change**.

There has been the **withdrawal from Afghanistan** with a whole host of **attendant emotions** as we contemplate the **ending of this war** as we approach the **20th anniversary of 9/11** which launched our involvement in Afghanistan. **Heartbreaking images**, well-founded **fears for women and girls**, the **agony of soldiers who served there** wondering **what their sacrifice was for**, as well as their **genuine love of and responsibility toward the Afghans who helped them**. The complexity is **mind-boggling and heart-rending**.

There's the **earthquake** that once again has **devastated Haiti**. How does one country suffer so much?

Add to this our **divisive political culture**. In recent weeks, during a **special session in Texas**, **laws were passed restricting voting rights, allowing gun owners to carry a gun without a permit or training, and banning abortions as early as 6 weeks with no exceptions for rape or incest**. *All of these are ethical, pastoral, personal, emotional, explosive issues—what happens in any part of the body politic ripples out to all of us*. As we continue to learn through the pandemic, *what happens in Texas, or any place else, never stays just in that one place*.

Which brings us to **another surge of COVID**, this time driven by the **Delta variant**, this time affecting **younger people and children**, this round **much more serious and deadly for those not vaccinated**.

Schools and colleges, teachers and students and families, are all wrestling with the rippling effects of **exposures and quarantines** and how to teach and learn amidst all of it.

Communities are so divided about how to navigate it—we simply can't get on the same page.

There were **two articles this week in the Watauga Democrat** about what **our medical workers at Watauga Medical Center** are living through right now. **It's awful**. *They treat everyone*, whether someone is **vaccinated or not**, but **the toll it's taking on them** is beyond words. *Daily*, they see the **regret of people, who never got vaccinated because they just thought they**

wouldn't get that sick, they see their regret as they have to **put them on ventilators and facilitate what might be the last Facetime with their family.** *Daily*, they have to **tell family members that they just don't have any other treatments to try.** *Daily*, they have to tell someone that they can't take them or transfer them to another hospital because there's just **no beds anywhere.** They are so very weary; they are so very weary. **Dr. Jennifer Nelson**, one of the ER doctors, put it this way: *"The first wave broke our backs, but I've never been more proud to stand beside my brave colleagues facing an unrelenting foe. This wave has broken our spirits."*

When I **got quiet on vacation**, when I finally **got still**, I became aware of **how heavy, how heavy the world feels right now** *and* the **weariness that comes with that weight.** I don't think I am alone in this. On **any given day**, if you **slow down enough**, you might **touch these feelings in yourself.** And as I listen to people, **there is so much grief.** **Things aren't back to normal, not at all.** We **thought we'd be in a different place by now**, and *we're not.* And we honestly **don't know when, or how, or if things we'll ever go back to the way they were.** It's **hard out there**, and it's a lot to hold. There is so much to be done, and we feel so powerless, so impotent, so depleted, so **not-up-to-the-task.**

On vacation, I ran across a quote that actually came from an essay that **Nadia Bolz-Webber**, a **Lutheran public theologian**, wrote **mid-August.** She writes this: *"I just do not think our psyches were developed to hold, feel and respond to everything coming at them right now; every tragedy, injustice, sorrow and natural disaster happening to every human across the entire planet, in real time every minute of every day. The human heart and spirit were developed to be able to hold, feel and respond to any tragedy, injustice, sorrow or natural disaster that was happening IN OUR VILLAGE."*

That feels right and got me to thinking. I had gotten into the **habit of waking up, reaching for the phone, and reading the news before even getting out of bed**—please tell me I'm not alone in this. After reading that quote, I **shifted my practices**—**get up, do yoga, do Qi Gong, pray, look at the mountains, anchor in my body, anchor my body and my spirit in my environment**, in the *geographical place* where I *actually live*, **do this before zooming out** to see **what's happening in the rest of the world.** It has made a huge difference in my heart and spirit, not to mention **being much kinder to my body and psyche.**

Nadia goes on in that essay to name some **discernment questions** that she learned from **Suzanne Stabile.** I encountered versions of these when I spent time at **Richard Rohr's Center for Action and Contemplation.** They go like this:

- **What's MINE to do, and what's NOT mine to do?**
- **What's MINE to say and what's NOT mine to say?**
- And the third one, she says, is harder: **What's MINE to care about and what's NOT mine to care about?**

As I think about **how our brains aren't wired to take in the suffering of the world**, but are wired to our *village*, this feels true, AND YET, I also know that there are people here at **St. Luke's** that have always had tremendous passion for concerns half a world away. **Jeff Boyer's** lifelong work in Honduras and **John and Trish Bartlett's** in Tanzania or **Allie Funk's** family in Central America immediately come to my mind. So, I think we have to **nuance** this.

The discernment questions still pertain, but let's set aside the local vs. global duality, and instead, understand that **our hearts and spirits, our psyches and bodies can only take in, and take on, so much.** So, it really is about wrestling with **what is MINE to do, and what isn't, and truly letting the rest go, trusting that the other particular concerns and work WILL be someone else's to do.**

And then, our prayers become prayers of asking God to open us to see and hear what IS ours to do. These are the actions that **God is taking all over the place in our scriptures today from Isaiah to the psalmist to Jesus in Mark's gospel—opening the eyes of the blind, unstopping the ears of the deaf.**

It's about **remembering, always, who it is who does the heavy lifting—that would be God—and who doesn't—that would be us.** The Collect understands that **we can't even muster trust right now on our own, but prays that we be given the gift of trust.** When we don't trust in God, then we tend to think **our own strength is all we've got,** and in my experience, that's generally a recipe for exhaustion and disaster. The Collect reminds us that **God never forsakes those who make their boast of God's mercy.** We pray for the *gift of trust* and lean hard into *God's mercy—that's how we keep living and breathing in a heavy world.*

The “**What is MINE to do and what is NOT mine to do?**” question **doesn't absolve us of action but focuses our action** in ways that are **sustainable and lifegiving and make the best of use of our unique gifts and passions within the constraints of our beautiful, finite, fallible, limited humanity.** Coming at the pain and work of the world this way also reminds that **we have to have each other.** It will take **ALL of us moving into the work that is OURS, specifically, to do to address ALL that is before us.**

Discovering what is MINE to do may come from a **passion that has long stirred within us, OR it may come from someone getting in our face and forcing us to see something we need to see.** That's how it worked for Jesus in today's gospel.

Jesus has gone to the region of Tyre. Now mind you, he was **encountering a heavy world.** He's just been dealing with the death of his cousin John and had to feed the 5,000; he can't get away from crowds, who are always bringing him an **endless stream of people to heal;** he's tangling with religious authorities; and *just for a moment,* he wants to get away for a little seaside holiday. He doesn't want anyone to know he's there. *But it's Jesus; he can't escape notice.* A Syrophenician Gentle woman brings her little daughter, who has an unclean spirit, and begs Jesus to cast the demon out. He blows her off: “**Let the children be fed first, i.e. the Jews, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.**” *Not his finest hour. We've all been there.*

And let me **digress** for a moment. If we just substitute the words “**vaccinated**” and “**unvaccinated**” for “**Jews/children**” and “**Gentiles/dogs**” in this story, we might learn something about **our own judgments about who is deserving of care** these days. I think that's worth sitting with for a bit as **our society processes anger and judgments fly over those who haven't gotten vaccinated.** *But back to the story.*

But all the woman knows is that her daughter needs help. She calls Jesus out, telling him that even the dogs get the crumbs. Jesus doesn't blast her for calling out his narrowness—a tactic most of us would have employed if someone called us out triggering our shame. No, Jesus stayed with it and stayed present to her; he was blind, and she opened his eyes—“*Human need is human need, Jesus, suffering never respects the boundaries we set, healing shouldn't either.*” He gets it, and he heals the girl.

When he leaves that place, he doesn't go back to *Jewish* territory; he goes to *Gentile* territory. They brought him a deaf man who struggled to speak. Jesus took the man aside; he got up close and personal with the man; he put his fingers into the man's ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

Be opened. Jesus had been opened by the woman, and now, he needed to pay that forward and help someone else get opened up too. He was much clearer about what was HIS to do. And when we get opened, other things that are blocked and stuck get released, too. We find our will to act; we find our voices again and can speak what needs to be spoken into the world.

As far as I can tell, the world is going to go right on being heavy. The only way we're going to make it is to pray for the *gift of trust*, to lean hard into *God's mercy* and *God's never-ending care and love* for this wondrous, and yes, broken world, AND to allow God to keep *opening our eyes and unstopping our ears to see and hear* and *set us free* to do what is OURS to do. AND then, to allow God to *release us* from what is NOT ours to do. The same with our words, the same with *weight and care that we hold in our hearts*.

Jesus isn't asking us to take on the suffering and injustice of the whole world—that's actually what he did on the cross. From his own hard experience today, he's asking *us* to hear the need before us that IS ours to do and to act on *that*. He's asking *us* to yoke ourselves to him and bear *that* burden with him. When we do that, the heaviness will shift, and we'll discover how the yoke can become easy and the burden light. Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
September 5, 2021

Links:

[If you can't take in anymore, there's a reason by Nadia Bolz-Webber--August 17, 2021](#)

[WMC doctors hold care vigil as they struggle with COVID-19 surge--Watauga Democrat, September 2, 2021](#)

[AppHealthCare, ARHS urge prevention as COVID-19 cases continue to increase--Watauga Democrat, September 1, 2021](#)