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## God Does Not Shout

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**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Todd D. Smelser**  
**The 8th Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 11B**

Last week the General Convention of the Episcopal Church finished its nine day session, doing the routine business of the Church and not making much head-line news. One notable exception was passage of legislation to create liturgies for same-sex blessings to take place in the Church, with the permission of the Diocesan Bishop. On the local level, Convention also consented to the Ordination of the Reverend Rob Wright as the new Bishop of Atlanta, to take place in October. In last Saturday's *New York Times*, there was a much quieter article, which seemed to mirror the theme of today's Gospel.

Fifteen years ago, when he was 35, Lucas Fleming was building a career as a criminal lawyer in the Tampa Bay area. He had recently divorced, was raising his three-year daughter alone, and feeling a failure as at about everything. So, arranging for his parents to take care of his daughter, he told his friends that he was going to Boston and spend 48 hours in a monastery. His friends were fearful that he was going off to be a monk. That didn't happen. But what did was the beginning of a personal tradition of annual visits to the Episcopal monastery run by the brothers of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, one of the oldest monastic communities in our Church.

Saint John the Evangelist is not in some remote and isolated place, like the Episcopal Benedictine monastery that I used to visit in Three Rivers, Michigan. Instead it was established in the heart of Cambridge, Massachusetts, home to both Harvard University and MIT. The monastery's austere complex of guesthouse, monk's residence, refectory and chapel, sits down the street from Harvard's prestigious Kennedy School of Government. Perhaps because of its geography, the monastery has fallen into a kind of specialty that of tending to the souls of people like Mr. Fleming—ambitious, inquisitive and intellectual people, enmeshed in the material world yet craving some way of detaching long enough to hear again the whisper of God.

"I feel a real sense of calm, a real sense of distance from my life," Mr. Fleming said of his retreats there. "It slows me down and makes me mindful. What I've learned from the brothers is how to be present." Brother Geoffrey Tristram, the Superior of the order said this in the same article. "People are drowning in words and drowning in information. Words are bombarding us from every side—to buy things, to believe things, to subscribe to things. We are trying to build a place to be still and silent. So many voices around us are shouting. God tends not to shout."

Today's Gospel passage concludes Mark's story of the mission of the Twelve, when Jesus gave the disciples authority and sent them out two by two. Bracketing the familiar accounts in Mark's lengthy story of the feeding of the five thousand and his walking on water to dispel the fears of the disciples, are the three brief accounts that we just heard. These are the disciples first "homecoming" with Jesus after their initial efforts in ministry; a journey with Jesus that does not turn out as expected; and their unanticipated arrival with Jesus in the region of Gennesaret, where much healing is needed and received.

Two fundamental questions emerge from the text and may help us in our own frenetic lives. How does God view the world? And, how does God ask us to view the world? For me, this passage of scripture gives us some pretty clear guidelines.

"He saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." The term compassion is explicitly used in describing Jesus' attitude toward human beings in at least eight Gospel references. It is implicit in the entire witness of his life, especially his healing ministry which is so prominent in today's text.

The German word for compassion is *Mitleid* which means quite literally, "with suffering." When Jesus had compassion for the crowd, sheep without a shepherd, it is a mark of his identification with humanity, and with the suffering of his fellow human beings. Jesus identifies with our lot not only in birth and life, but also in death. For Christians this is not just a statement about a good, generous and loving human being, Jesus of Nazareth. It is also a statement about God, the source of our lives and of all life. This understanding also reminds us that we are accountable to that God, and that our behavior, our ethics, flows from our belief, our theology.

Most of us suffer from something. For some it's a serious disease or chronic health situation. For others it's the burden of sleepless nights, or guilty thoughts, or unfulfilled dreams. For many of us, however, we suffer from the effects of our culture: too busy lives, and too much noise. Jesus' disciples seemed to suffer from that problem as well. "For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat." Our own busyness prevents us often from gathering for meals with family or friends. But what happens if we become too busy to come away and break bread together? This text suggests to us contemporary Christians that gathering as a faith community to rest from our labors and partake of a common meal is still an important part of life together. We need times to re-form ourselves as the Church, the Body of Christ.

The reflections of an 18th-century spiritual director might be helpful as we wrestle with this question. Jean-Pierre de Caussade wanted to understand how Christians might know what God would have them to do in each moment of every day. He taught that God reveals Godself in each moment, but that Christians must learn to pay attention to God's presence and surrender themselves continually to God's will. De Caussade wrote, "Everything turns to bread to nourish me, soap to wash me, fire to purify me, and a chisel to fashion me in the image of God. Grace supplies all my needs."

The Pastoral Care ministry of the Church is about compassion about being with those who suffer. This can take place at a hospital bedside, or in a clergy office, or in the ministry of our Eucharistic Visitors who bring communion to those who can no longer attend church. It can also happen with a therapist at our Counseling Center, in a conversation in the Book Store, in a Bible study or at a youth event. But it is not a ministry of our own making, but is directly related to the healing ministry that was at the very center of Jesus' ministry. For the church to live out what it professes, it must itself always be a place of healing, of mending broken hearts and souls, giving hope to those without hope, and bread to those without bread, and holy purpose to those who have lost sight of their Good Shepherd.

Over the years, Mr. Fleming from Tampa Bay has invited over twenty friends to join him at that Episcopal monastery in Cambridge, into that safe place. He even worked with the monks to develop a workshop for lawyers on listening skills. More personally he runs his law office on the principle of limits. It opens at 8:30 and closes promptly at 5. The time before and after belongs to his family, and his daughter, now in college, still lives with her dad. He meditates twenty minutes each day, attends church every Sunday, and spends several days every few months at some monastic community. His law practice, far from suffering, is growing and thriving. Mr. Fleming has learned that God does not shout.

If your spiritual life has become overwhelmed by all the noise and confusion which seem to surround so many of us, perhaps you too might consider finding a place where might hear again the whisper of God.

"Come to me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you."