

Matthew 9: 35-38

What is your gut feeling?

June 18, 2017 The 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Roy W. Howard

The first thing I want to say is thank you for your prayers and your affection while I was away. It's wonderful thing to share with people all over the world how I blessed I am to have my beloved family and congregation, and pastoral colleague in Shelby.

The second thing to say is that the timing on the return might have been much better if it were on a Monday rather late on Friday evening. Honestly, I'm still a bit bewildered by jet lag. I haven't had sufficient time to process what occurred on this extraordinary pilgrimage, that I could not have done without your support, and that of my family, for which I am very grateful. Though I wrote a bit each day on Facebook and posted some photos, I look forward to sharing more of my journey with you. I'll try to restrain myself from oversharing but I can't make promises about that!

The gospel reading for today is actually perfect for some reflections together about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in the world. Much has occurred in the world in the past few weeks most of which I know nothing about other than random headlines that came my way from time to time. What I do know that that there is a great deal of grief, personal pain and common suffering that comes from a unfathomable demonic source of violences threatening to rip apart the human fabric. The emotional toxicity spewing over the communities and the people we love is frightening and beyond crazy. I believe that the emotions we carry have a larger life than only ourselves. Which is why it's so crucial to pay attention to our lives, particularly what we are putting into the global emotional atmosphere. This is no different from paying attention to the toxic chemicals we put into the earth and air. What you put into the global atmosphere from your spirit contributes to the health of the world or not. I believe this has always been true, and it is also why certain toxic elements like can appear across the world at the same time. Of course, it's true of the positive emotions too - like love, compassion, kindness and mercy.

Jesus senses something at a very deep personal depth this as he travels his own path. He clearly knows the world into which he is sending his followers like you and me. What I find most remarkable is Jesus' deep emotional response. He doesn't just know the "the world" in some abstract way. He knows the realities of real people who are wandering around - spiritually lost, bewildered, frightened and anxious for their lives. To these people - real people in the real world of human experience - he sends his disciples to share his gospel - the gospel of life. The Greek word used to describe Jesus' response is one of the finest in the Bible. Splanchnizomai - means to be moved from the core of your being. In the original setting, it was to be moved from the bowels. You might say he was moved in his gut, with compassion for the people who

were like sheep without a shepherd. To real people, the disciples of Jesus are still sent, so that they may know God's love for them. This is the truest form of evangelism.

Jesus teaches us by his own life that evangelism begins when you feel in your gut the situation of others. All sharing begins in compassion. Now, like then, people are wandering lost like sheep without a shepherd. When you can feel for another's situation, only then can you begin to share the gospel of life.

The primary purpose of my pilgrimage was to walk among young people on the camino who are nones, seekers or atheists. I wanted to listen to and learn from those who emphatically reject religion, but not always God. And I wanted to share my life with them as a Christian; to be vulnerable without the self protections, filters and privileges of a pastor. I suppose it's similar to journalists who embed themselves within the communities they are reporting. I wanted to embed myself with folks who not be spending 14 days sleeping, eating, partying, suffering, walking and talking with a pastor. That requires earning their trust. I'm very grateful to God for the four young people that allowed me to walk with them and grow together in camino friendship. Marvin, Elena, Clara and Matthias: I learned from as they shared their lives with me and I shared my life with them. We experienced many things together, none of which they ever imaged they would be doing with a pastor. I am both amazed and grateful to God for the young people with whom I walked this journey over 200 miles. 229 miles to be exact, but hey, who's counting?

We became a little band of merry pilgrims, like the hobbits of middle earth moving toward Mordor. Three were from Germany and the other from Barcelona, now living in Berlin. As we walked I was honored to that they allowed me to enter their lives by sharing their stories of their own questions, dreams, disappointments, desires and personal suffering, the depth of which astonished me. It made me think we are all carrying burdens that we don't have the time or the trust or the vulnerability to share. In the end I wrote for each one a statement of my gratitude for their gifts and a prayer of blessing for their future. It was than that Elena offered me the highest compliment. She said, "When we talk, you make me want to believe in God." Isn't this the hope of Jesus for people: that all will know God's love? At the pilgrim mass in Santiago she cried because she was moved so deeply by the sermon. When I asked why, she said "it wasn't about religion or some God I don't understand; it was about life, real life and how we are to live for others." God only knows where this will lead her, but she is on the way, along with all pilgrims of the heart.

This for me, is evangelism: to experience the lives of others honestly and respond truly from the gut as Jesus did. You might have another way, but all of Jesus' followers are called to go forth into the world to share the gospel with our life. It all begins with splanchnizomai: that feeling of compassion in your gut, with a desire that all people experience the love of God.

What are your gut feeling today? Where is Jesus sending you?

