

St. Mark's Episcopal Church

Sunday June 14, 2026

Text: Matthew

Title: Small Things or Lavishing Love

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” The Gospel writer gives us a view into the interior life of Jesus as he goes about teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing all kinds of disease and illness.

Jesus sees people troubled, abandoned, and crushed, without leadership, and his heart goes out to them, he identifies with them. Jesus' response is a “prophetic sigh” – profound grief at the suffering condition of God's good creation. It's a gut-wrenching sense that “Things are not supposed to be this way.”

Have you ever had this feeling? “This is not how things are supposed to be!” This means that you have a compassionate heart, that you have within you a vision of something better, where human thriving is the goal, something that we might want to call the kingdom of God. So when you feel this, you can grieve but don't despair for the heart of God is alive within you.

The “Shepherds” of Jesus' day: the Roman empire and the religious elites are inflicting pain on people through social, economic, political, and religious abuse. They do not notice the needs of the people. They don't care. This is how power without compassion acts. But Jesus sees

the people, and his loving heart wants to take action. Cultivating this loving heart is at the core of the spiritual life.

Jesus sees that what is needed is new leadership for a renewed community. He asks his own friends and followers to take the risk to lead through service. Jesus' leadership is not about hierarchy, (who am I in charge of), but about service, (how can I help?). A true leader is one who cares for the people, all the people, working to ensure their well-being.

Jesus calls the disciples to leadership that is embodied leadership, deeply relational and motivated by compassion rather than greed or the lust for power. He asks them to pray for more laborers. This is an extremely sly instruction. For if they pray for laborers, it will slowly but surely dawn on them that they are the laborers they are praying for. They are to be the extension of Jesus' ministry in the world.

Perhaps you have noticed that the word ministry has been in the air lately with our move to St. Mark's Across the Street. The situation has called all kinds of new ministries and ministry leaders into being. I've been humbled by the amazing amount of service and help that has been rendered to get us out of our own building for the renovation and to begin a new adventure in worship across the street. There has been so much loving service by the wonderful people of St. Mark's. From reclaiming pews, packing up the sacristy, to hauling things downstairs, sorting things, becoming crossing guards, taking flower arrangements across the street, creating liturgical hangings, taking things to the thrift store, leading music, organizing and taking on new responsibilities.

The word ministry sometimes seems like an overused “churchy word”. It’s a word that can seem a bit worn or tired. There is a famous quote by the Anglican biblical scholar Sir Edwyn Hoskyns who spoke about the spiritual task of reviving exhausted words: “Can we rescue a word and discover a universe? Can we study a language and awake to the truth? Can we bury ourselves in the lexicon and arise in the presence of God...? Diving beneath the surface of words themselves we sometimes find vivid images and meanings that we are missing. in our tired and unexamined words.

Our word deacon comes from the Greek word diakonia, a word we often translate as ministry. It comes from two words dia, meaning through, and konis, meaning dust or grit. The original image behind Christian service and ministry is activity that takes you through the dust. The great Anglican Bishop, Lancelot Andrewes always insisted that every kind of office in the church whether lay or ordained was a kind of “deaconing”, “on foot and through the dust, for so is the nature of the world.” All people of God then are called to some sort of “deaconing,” to getting our hands and feet dirty in service to the Most High.

Ministry then refers to something close to the ground, a continuous journey through the grit and grime of the everyday. Ministry is quite literally dirty work – “through the grit and the grime on foot.” Ministry always deals with the nitty-gritty of real human needs and struggles.

While the Greek word for ministry emphasizes the “gritty” aspect of ministry the Latin roots of this word emphasize the “nitty” part of the

ministry. Ministry comes from the Latin root for “small things”, as in the word miniscule. A minister is one who is involved in little matters, small affairs while a magister or magistrate is responsible for big affairs or larger issues.

Knowing that ministry has to do with the small things in life, the “nitty gritty” of life and not some grandiose plan to save the world is helpful. Few of us, lay or ordained have big lives, with careers that make a huge visible impact in the public sphere. Our lives and our ministries seem to deal with such ordinary things that it is often difficult to grasp their meaning or lasting impact. The ways each of us touch each other’s lives are often fleeting and unnoticed – the visit to the hospital, the offer of encouragement, the thank you card, the reading of a lesson in church, greeting people as they enter for worship, singing in the choir, watching our neighbor’s kids so she can go to an appointment, preparing to teach a story of our faith to children, the tutoring session at the school down the street, the time spent listening to another person’s grief, the sermon delivered, the chairs and tables setup, sandwiches made, meals dropped off during a difficult time. The scale of such activities can seem so small. But we also know deep down how a small thing can make such a difference for us especially at the needed time.

Jesus encouraged his disciples and empowered them for ministry by unlocking a secret that small and hidden actions can have an enormous impact. To illustrate this he told hilarious parables about how a little bitty mustard seed grows into something large enough for the birds of the air to perch in.

I love this notion that it is in the small things, the miniature acts of service, that we take our place in the kingdom of God. There is no act of loving service that is too small or too humble to be offered. For it is in the diving into the human condition that we discover the life and love of Christ anew. It is in the midst of doing the smallest of things for one another that the thick network of relationships is built and the force-field of love and hope known as the kingdom of God is built by our ten-thousand acts of love and care.

Sometimes we give the impression that the church is where you come seeking, wanting, shopping for something you want. Are you concerned about our child's spiritual formation? We can help with that. Are you troubled by the evil in the world? Come and find kindred spirits. Are you lonely? Come and be part of a community? The church exists to meet your needs, answer your questions, solve your problems, and respond to your wants.

There is just one tiny problem with this marketing approach of the church. There is very little in our sacred scriptures that supports this consumer image of the church. What if the church isn't the means whereby you get what you want out of God but rather the place where God gets what God wants out of you? What if Christian discipleship isn't the way God meets your needs but rather you are the way that God meets the world's needs?

While we may question God's judgement, I think that this sacred story is saying something like this:

Whatever good that Jesus Christ, Son of God, savior of the world, wants to do among us, he chooses not to do it alone. He chooses to do it with you.

Jesus sends his disciples, that means you and me, out to continue the work he has begun. The same compassion that drives Jesus is to drive those who choose to follow him. Our basic task is to lavish love and life on people who have never experienced it.

“The hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbor as the self — to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince, or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it,” writes Barbara Brown Taylor

For reasons known only to Jesus, he has called you to be his contemporary disciple, his person in the world, a sign of the outbreak of God’s kingdom right here, right now. You are his appointed means of overcoming what’s wrong with the world.

I’m sorry if you came here today thinking that Jesus was mainly about meeting your needs, soothing your aches and pains, answering your questions. To be sure, those good things often occur through encounters with Jesus. But Jesus’ typical way of doing good for you is by commissioning you to do good for someone else. Finding yourself by losing yourself. Doing the small things.

I’ll end with this poem entitled To Be of Use by + Marge Piercy

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.
I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.
I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.
The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.