When I was in seminary, I knew a young student named Jimmy. Jimmy was sweet and friendly and completely without pretense. I knew that one day, Jimmy would make a fine pastor but he was totally lacking in some other skills, those that required a certain level of physical coordination. Jimmy joined one of the rebuilding groups that I was part of following Hurricane Hugo. Hugo ripped off roofs all over the island of St. Croix, leaving homeowners vulnerable to the elements and without water for their homes. The majority of people on St. Croix use corrugated metal for their roofs. Water runs down the valleys in the metal and into a gutter on the side of the house, then down a pipe into a cistern under the house. If a house doesn't have a roof, there is no way to gather water for bathing, drinking, cooking or washing clothes and dishes.

Our group of seminarians and a few seasoned construction workers made our way to the first house we were to repair. Jimmy wanted to be on the roof, so he climbed up and helped nail plywood on the rebuilt rafters. Before long, we heard a loud shout and hurried to find Jimmy with one leg on the plywood and the other sticking down into the homeowner's living room. He was stuck and it took a couple of strong men to get him back on his feet. That was the end of roof work for Jimmy. He next volunteered to stand on the scaffolding and hold the gutters as they were being secured to the roof. But Jimmy didn't have a very good idea of where he was in space, so when he decided to get a better grip on the guttering by taking a step backward, there was no scaffolding to hold him up. A loud thud brought us all running again. This time, Jimmy lay on the ground, face up, the breath knocked clean out of him. He was checked out and all his bones appeared intact. Jimmy still wanted to be useful, so when he recovered from that blow, he found a hammer and started pulling nails out of boards and 2X4s on the ground. A loud shout brought us to Jimmy again, where he stood with a gash in his forehead, where the claw of the hammer had gouged him. During the final days of our work trip, Jimmy patrolled the worksite, picking up nails that had fallen on the ground and fetching tools for other workers.

Jimmy was able to laugh at his injuries, which gave the rest of us a chance to laugh, too, and blow off some steam. Jimmy lightened up the worksite with his sunny disposition. And he found a job that was useful, for most of us were in tennis shoes and no one wanted to step on those roofing nails that had fallen on the ground. It's not like the rest of us students were much better at what we were doing that Jimmy. There were more than enough splinters, blisters and sunburns to go around that week. Those who went on that trip weren't chosen for their construction skills, but were there because they said “yes” to a call for help.

Matthew tells us that Jesus chose his disciples in much the same way as our work crew was chosen. Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee when he saw Simon and his brother Andrew fishing from the lakeshore. He said, “Come with me and I will teach you how to fish for people.” The brothers dropped their nets and followed him. Jesus found some other disciples in a boat and one in a tax booth by the side of the road. Jesus didn't try to find people who were highly educated or with other credentials for such a demanding job as disciple. Instead he seemed to welcome anyone who said “yes” to his request.

When Jesus saw the crowds waiting for him in all the cities and villages he visited, he had compassion for them, for they were, in the words of Matthew, “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Jesus knew there were countless others out there who were also hungry for a word of hope. When he sent his disciples out to care for those people, he wasn't sending them as trained psychologists and physicians, but as those who were harassed and helpless themselves. The disciples knew what it was like to have a chronic disease or loss of hope, because that's what it's like to be human, to be hapless and unable to help oneself. Rather than disqualify them from Jesus' mission, the disciples' own failings bound them to those they touched in Jesus' name. The disciples were like multiple Jimmys sent out to comfort and heal the Jimmys of their day.
Jesus hasn't changed his recruitment process much from those early days of his ministry.

Jesus asks someone to be his disciple, sometimes out of the blue, and when that person says “yes,” Jesus claps his hands with joy and puts them to work right away, often without very much training at all. Jesus does see the gifts every one of us has for ministry and places us in community so we can encourage one another and find a place for each one, still Jesus knows that most of the time, every one of us feels more like Jimmy than as someone equipped for the job of disciple. I know that's absolutely true for me. From the time I said a reluctant “yes” to going to seminary to this very day, I often feel helpless and inadequate, sometimes even harassed by the difficulties of life. I know most of you feel exactly the same way at one time or another.

When Jesus saw the crowds waiting for him, he knew of their illnesses, physical and mental. He knew the hardships each one faced. Instead of being repulsed, Jesus felt compassion for them. He healed the people and comforted them. He gave the hopeless hope. Then he sent his disciples, those twelve men who were more like the crowds than they were different. Jesus sent his disciples out to find more harassed and helpless people and to heal them in his name. This is what Jesus does – brings healing and liberation to those who so desperately need it. He has compassion for those who suffer and he sends his disciples out to bear healing in his name.

If you hear nothing else that I say today, hear this. Jesus knows how hard it can be to live in this world. He knows that living in a country that is so divided, that hearing rhetoric that is so barbed, that dealing with relationships that are tattered and strained can drain us of hope. Hear this. Jesus offers himself to us in water, wine and bread, food for this difficult journey. He gives us to one another, so that together we might build up the body of Christ.

And then he sends us to search out the harassed and helpless, those who feel so alone they do not even know they have a shepherd who loves them. Jesus shows us the refugee family and we find a way to speak Christ's hope to them, maybe through one of the ministries of the larger church. Jesus shows us the hungry and we find food to feed them. Jesus shows us those who feel harassed because of the color of their skin, the language they speak, their sexual orientation and he tells us to welcome them in the name of Jesus and to work tirelessly so their rights are not denied them. Healing and liberation. That's what Jesus gives to us through his death and resurrection. Healing and liberation. That's what we offer others in Jesus' name. Even if we're not very good at it, for Jesus can do amazing things through us. Even when we feel as useless as a Jimmy at a worksite, Jesus has compassion on us as he finds a way to make of us laborers in his harvest.

Amen.

Pentecost 2A

Matthew 9:35-10:8