

The Price of Gas

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Matthew 9:35–10:23

Lord, may we behold one another with your compassion. Amen.

Every high school, if it's lucky, has a teacher like Jim Hurley. Over 40 years ago, the senior class at Lenox Memorial High School called him "Hurls," out of affection and respect. He was brilliant, demanding, and kind. When a 17-year-old started Jim's *American Novel* course in the fall of 1978 with a hint of promise, Hurls encouraged that spark.

When that 17-year-old got a part-time job pumping gas, and then his first serious girlfriend, his academic performance suffered. Hurls responded by crafting a witty, compassionate note to the student and his parents. In it, Hurls tracked the student's up and down performance against the metaphorical price of gas and its major fluctuations. It was a thoughtful, tender gesture that landed... without a sound. The 17-year-old couldn't appreciate the depth of his teacher's compassion. The student never responded. Never thanked his teacher.

Hurls wrote that note with a posture we might describe as "in good faith." The phrase has a commonly understood meaning. From Webster's: "to act with genuine honesty, fairness, and sincere intent to fulfill one's obligations." But I'd like to propose that in today's Gospel, Jesus gives us a new, deeper understanding of this phrase. As Jesus so often does, he takes something we think we know and turns it sideways, and we're the better for it.

As I see it, in today's Gospel Jesus moves through three steps to act "in good faith" – and in retrospect, they are the very steps Hurls took at his desk.

It begins with **compassion**. Jesus looks at the crowds – harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd – and he is moved. That is why he calls the twelve into service in the first place: not a grand plan, but a heart broken open. Hurls knew that feeling, watching one of his students lose his equilibrium.

Then, Jesus acts. He doesn't withdraw, or throw up his hands, or fret about the rag tag group he's collected and the meager resources at hand. Jesus works with what – and who – he has. There are, after all, people suffering, people in need of healing. Hurls, working with what he has, picks up his pen.

And then Jesus does the thing that turns "in good faith" sideways. Having given the disciples their clear, if unorthodox, instructions, Jesus **trusts**. He trusts his disciples to embody his authority – the authority to heal, to cleanse, to cast out. He trusts "the Spirit of the Father" to give them words, and likely more, when things turn sour – as they surely will. And Jesus trusts enough to send the disciples down the road without following. He lets them go. So did Hurls: he handed over the note. He let it go.

Jesus knows they won't win everyone over – hence the instruction to "shake the dust from your feet" and move on. Some doors will stay closed; some people won't listen. But it isn't about keeping score. It isn't about tallying up "successes" or "wins." It's about being faithful to the mission – about going out "in good faith."

It turns out our own parish core values have a lot to tell us about the nature of this faith. From our core values: “Faith is not certainty. Faith is trust in God.” And here we find the reason Jesus has so little concern for “results.” It isn’t that the stakes are low – they’re as high as stakes get. This is real suffering by people who clearly do not deserve their fate.

The “results,” it turns out, are God’s responsibility. But notice how God carries them. Not by promising things will turn out the way we hoped – we know better than that. God carries the “results” by being present. By staying. By going ahead to the next town and waiting there. The God we are asked to trust does not promise a happy ending. God promises something harder and deeper: to never leave.

The disciples are not asked to do the impossible. They’re asked to have compassion, to act, and to trust. To act, in other words, in good faith.

So, we begin to see that the defining element of acting in good faith is not simply good intentions. It’s the willingness to let go of the need to succeed. And here is where we need to pay particular attention: we don’t let go because the results don’t matter. They matter, terribly. We let go of the outcome to follow Jesus’ lead - so that our hands, our hearts, our minds, our attention, our prayers are freed up to do the one thing we can actually do – be fully present. To, in a word, ***abide***.

We release what we cannot control so that we can offer what we can. We step out, with compassion, even when, perhaps especially when, we don’t know what will come of it. We dare to do this because it is exactly what God does for us: God, who could not promise an easy road, stays with us, no

matter the terrain. The promise we receive instead? God is not finished with us.

And that, friends, is Good News. The mission isn't to "win." There is no final score that when reached unlocks an easy and ultimately saccharine prize.

But don't misunderstand the mission: our actions **do** matter. We are freed from the pressure to make it **work** – not from the call to do it with love. Hurls clearly labored over that note; compassion is rarely careless. We are simply called to go forth, in good faith – and to trust that we never go alone.

That is what Jim Hurley did for me. Yes, as I'm sure you've already figured out, I was that overwhelmed 17-year-old. I was the closed door: the one a beloved, brilliant teacher reached out toward, out of simple compassion, with no assurance it would land, or matter, or even be noticed. And it didn't land – not completely, not for years. He reached out anyway.

We don't need to be brilliant English teachers to act in good faith. We don't need to take on a grand mission - healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out demons. Maybe it's fitting that we hear this now, in the season the church calls Ordinary Time. Because good faith isn't mostly lived out in the high holy days. It's lived out in the ordinary ones. We simply need to go, in good faith. Write the note. Make the call. Extend the invitation. Bear a small kindness. Show up. Resist the temptation to offer advice. Be present. Abide. And then, trust God with the rest.

Amen.