“He began to teach them many things,” are the closing words from today’s gospel from Saint Mark. Those words made me think, “What are the many things Jesus wants to teach us?” For me all of today’s scripture give us, you and me, clues about what Jesus wants to teach us. I would like to start with the Prophet Jeremiah.

In verse 2 he said, “You have scattered my sheep and driven them away. You have not cared for them.” Jeremiah is bluntly telling the leaders of the Jews that they have failed to heed God’s words by not caring for all the people.

In verse 4 we heard, “I will raise up shepherds for them who will shepherd them so that they need no longer fear and tremble; none shall be missing,” and in verse 5, “he shall do what is just and right in the land.” Jeremiah is telling the Jews who have been scattered to many lands during the Babylonian captivity that there is hope, the Lord will raise up for them a new leader who will do what is just and right. A shepherd that will care for all his sheep. Shepherd was a traditional title for a king in the ancient Near East. This is a foreshadowing of Jesus the compassionate healer that Jeremiah talks about again in verse five when he says God will, “raise up a righteous shoot to David.” With the words I just mentioned what is Jesus trying to teach us today?

A lesson in compassion – providing and caring for others.

A lesson about relationships – a concern for the community.

A lesson about shepherds – an attitude of providing and caring.

Today is the sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary time. During Ordinary time in the church’s calendar the first reading very often will prepare us for the Gospel.
What connection do today’s first reading and the gospel have in common? Mark says that Jesus’ “heart was moved with pity” for the crowds of people that followed him and the apostles. The people wanted more contact with Jesus and the apostles who have just returned from a very successful mission. The people had heard amazing things that made great sense to the many poor and disenfranchised of first century Palestine. Then the gospel writer says, “they were like sheep without a shepherd” and Jesus “began to teach them many things.” The people needed someone to walk with them and show them the way to go. They needed Jesus the shepherd, the shoot of David Jeremiah spoke of in the first reading. Jesus the messiah gave the people hope of a better life.

Jesus taught them and us about putting aside his own needs, in this case the need for rest, putting aside our own needs whatever they are, to meet the needs of others.

Jesus teaches us what a good shepherd does.

Jesus who according to Saint Paul in the second reading from Ephesians, “came and preached peace to you who were far off (the Gentiles) and peace to those who were near (the Jews), for through him both have access in one Spirit to the Father.” Jesus teaches us that peace is possible between groups of people who are far apart. Jesus is the peace that breaks down barriers. Jesus teaches that peace and reconciliation is not only possible within our church but also the world. Hopefully we will someday see peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

My sisters and brothers, I’ve talked about the teaching Jesus did in the first reading, the second reading and the gospel and I’d like to finish with the Responsorial Psalm.
Our Responsorial Psalm today is the famous 23rd psalm many of us are familiar with from hearing at funerals. How did I connect this Psalm to the other readings? My connection to the other readings is this: the 23rd Psalm describes

- the concerns a shepherd has for his sheep,
- the concerns a leader has for the people in his care,
- the concerns we as a pastoral people have for our community,

a shepherd gives repose,
a shepherd leads,
a shepherd refreshes, and a shepherd guides. How is Jesus a shepherd in your life?

Jesus, the eternal shepherd, tells his friends in the gospel to go to a deserted place and rest a while. Jesus sees the need to balance action and rest. Jesus sees their needs and responds in love. He offers to lead them to a place of repose.

Over the Liturgical year, we hear many Scripture passages about Jesus going off somewhere by himself to pray, to be refreshed by the presence of God, to be opened to God’s will in His life. These include the night before He is to be crucified as we know from the story of his time in the garden at Gethsemane. Jesus knew he needed time by himself to be with God and knew that his disciples needed to be refreshed by the presence of God. Jesus teaches us today that we need to be refreshed by the presence of God. In our noisy, crowded and fast-paced world we are busy just living our lives, working at home or outside the home, going to school and all sorts of other activities, and just trying to make ends meet. A deserted place for prayer and meditation can be a true blessing. Spending time alone with God opens our hearts to receive God’s compassion for us. Yes, Jesus knows we need that time with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
For me, when I hear that little voice inside saying, “You need to find time to be by yourself,” I know God is telling me that there is a need for me to listen to Him in my deserted place. That place of repose is my office. I go to this quiet place to relax, breathe and meditate. To try and feel God’s presence within me. Being compassionate is very hard for me. But I’m getting better at it. Just recently I was blessed with a moment of compassion as I listened to a friend describe over the phone how he’s struggling with his wife’s dementia. I could hear in his voice the uncertainty of their future. All I could do was offer to be available, so he could have someone to talk to when he felt alone and depressed. Compassion comes easier for me when I practice it after being present with God in my deserted place. You might find your deserted, quiet place in some church, at a shrine, a park or a secluded room in your house. If you have not experienced this quiet, contemplative time in your life or perhaps need to have a short refresher in contemplation you might join us here at Saint Paul’s on Thursday, August 2nd when Mary Reichley, our retired Pastoral Associate, will lead us in a morning of prayer and reflection. See the parish website for more information.

I would like to close with a few words about verse 34 from today’s gospel, “they were like sheep without a shepherd.” As sad as this line is it will never be true again! That’s right I said it will never be true again! No matter how many times we turn our backs to God to meet the demands of our calendar or our “to-do” lists, no matter how many times we hurt or disappoint others, no matter how many times we give into our fears there will always be a faithful shepherd who will not mislead, who will not abandon the truth, who will never desert the flock. Jesus said, “I am with you always until the end of time.” Jesus always present in the Eucharist, Jesus always present within us as the Holy Spirit, so we can become his hands, his feet and his voice as we bring hope and healing into the lives of others. Peace be with you.