

The Guts – Living Compassionately

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



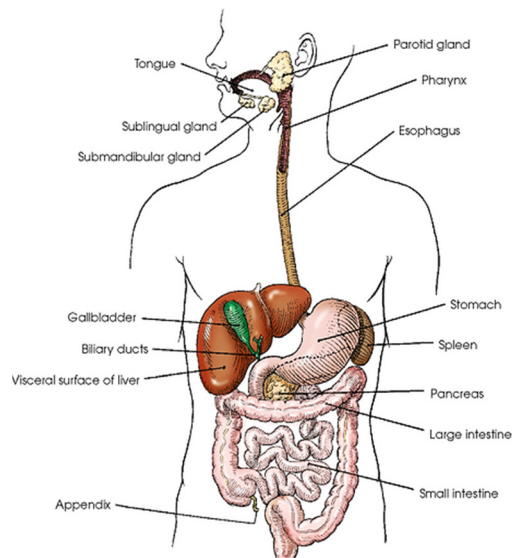
"The Red Vineyard at Arles" by Vincent Van Gogh

Prayer of Illumination

Gracious God, give us humble,
teachable, and obedient hearts,
that we may receive what you have revealed,
and do what you have commanded.

Amen.

Background



There's a lot inside of you—literally. Your alimentary canal is about 40 feet long if you are a male, a bit less if female. The surface area of all that tubing is about half an acre. The journey of food from your mouth to the sewer takes about 55 hours for a man and 72 hours for a female. We don't know why food lingers in women a day longer than men. My hypothesis is that us guys wolf down our food too fast. Your stomach is about 10 inches long and is shaped like a boxing glove. It can hold about 1 ½ quarts—much smaller than most animals. A large dog's stomach is about twice the size of your stomach. When your stomach rumbles, it's actually not your stomach—it's your large intestine growling. The fancy name for that growling sound is borborygmi (bor-br-ig-mai). Your stomach kills off microbes by drenching them in hydrochloric acid. So how come the digestive acids dissolve food, but not us? Give thanks to God for the epithelium. The epithelium lines your alimentary system with just one layer of protective cells. The epithelium is the only thing that keeps you from melting away from the inside like the wicked witch of the west.

Food poisoning is no fun. It usually takes about 24 hours for sickness to kick in. So, food poisoning usually isn't the last thing you ate—it's usually the thing you ate before the last thing you ate. About 20% of food poisoning comes from salads. Each meal spends about 4-6 hours in the stomach, 6-8 hours in the small intestine, and up to 3 days in the colon.

Fiber is good for your guts. It keeps them happy and cuts down your risks for many diseases. Your small intestine is about 25 feet long and it's there that most digestion takes place. Food moves through your small intestine at the rate of 1 inch per minute. The large intestine—known as the bowel or colon—is 6 feet long, almost twenty feet shorter than the small intestine.

For all our middle schoolers out there—we poop about ½ pound a day, 180 pounds a year, and 14,000 pounds in a lifetime. Believe it or not, Judaism has a bathroom prayer called the Asher Yatzar thanking God for this, Lord willing, daily miracle. One last bit of potty talk—I'm going to get in trouble with my mom, but here goes: "Gaseous emanations" from the body, technically called flatus,

are made up of up to 50% carbon dioxide, up to 40% hydrogen, and up to 20% nitrogen. The main culprit for the noxious scent of the flatus is hydrogen sulfide.

All of this discussion about guts leads us to our scripture reading. There's a Greek word in our text that speaks of Christ's warm, compassionate response to need: *splanchnizomai*. Repeat after me: *splan-chniz-o-mai*. :) It literally means "to have one's bowels move" or "gut response."

Splanchnizomai refers to feeling and action that come from the deepest depths of our being. The NRSV translates it as "compassion." But it goes deeper than that. It's a fierce word. It reminds one of a mama bear. In fact, there are scholars that argue the entirety of Jesus' ministry can be summarized with this one word: *splanchnizomai*. Six times that word is used of Jesus.

Splanchnizomai conveys so much more than mere sympathy. It's a practical response that meets a dire need. It starts with emotion and finishes with effective action.

Jesus was—

- moved to compassion by the world's pain.
- moved to compassion by the world's sorrow.
- moved to compassion by the world's hunger.
- moved to compassion by the world's loneliness.
- moved to compassion by the world's confusion.
- moved to compassion by the world's oppressed.

Jesus was drawn to the hopeless, the aimless, and the leaderless—the dejected, rejected, and infected. His compassion led him to action—to guide, to nourish, to comfort, and to strengthen. What moved Jesus to compassion must move us to compassion and action. Jesus' mission is the church's mission, every Christian's mission. I'm thankful for my wife Sarah who has countless times over two decades shown me what *splanchnizomai* looks like in the real world.

In our Scripture, we see Jesus is very familiar with his environment and region. He's always listening and observing. He knows the condition of the multitudes. They're lost. He responds, not with resignation or anger, but with compassion and action—teaching, preaching, healing, and praying—and he challenges us to do the same.

So let's hear our gospel reading for today from:

Scripture: Matthew 9:35-38 (NRSV)

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON: The Guts – Living Compassionately



The 2013 movie "Gravity" is about an astronaut, played by George Clooney, and a medical engineer, played by Sandra Bullock, who work together in an effort to survive after a catastrophe destroys their shuttle and leaves them adrift in orbit. It's a moving film with incredible special-effects. There's a powerful scene where Sandra Bullock's character thought she was going to die. She speaks the following words through her tears to the emptiness of space: [YouTube link](#)

*Oh, I'm going to die . . . I know . . . we're all gonna die,
everybody knows that. But I'm going to die today!
It's funny that . . . you know, to know.
But the thing is, is that I'm still scared.
I'm really scared.
Nobody will mourn for me, no one will pray for my soul.
Will you mourn for me? Will you say a prayer for me?
Or is it too late? Ugh. I mean, I'd say one for myself,
but I've never prayed in my life, . . .
But nobody ever taught me how.
Nobody ever taught me how . . .*

"The harvest is plentiful," says Jesus, "but the workers are few." Pray to the Lord of the harvest, that he may send forth laborers to his harvest. That he would send forth workers with *splanchnizomai*. Pray for people with deep compassion—the guts to go to the lost and confused, the helpless and the

harassed. They're the harvest—the fields are ripe. We go to the harvest, the harvest doesn't come to us.

A gutsy faith is a show and tell faith. A lived faith. Faith in action, whereby the Spirit of God, we talk the talk and we walk the walk. We speak Christian words of truth and we enact Christian deeds of love. Word and deed—hand in hand. Not either/or—it's both/and.

I want to be a pastor who has *splanchnizomai* where deep down in my gut I care about a generation that's never been taught to pray. If you're wanting to learn to pray, I can't recommend enough Father James Martin's brand new book "*Learning to Pray: A Guide for Everyone*." I want my words and deeds to point to the good news of God's gracious reign and rule. That's good news, not bad news that's designed to be shared. Just as Jesus was mighty in word and deed, let's be a listening and sharing people who bring healing and reconciliation—in both word and deed. In person, online, and out in the world. The Spirit moves us from prayer to action. Prayer is not just for our benefit. Prayer inspires us to grow, to change, to act—to step out in faith into new places—to deepen our trust in God—to deepen our *splanchnizomai*—our compassion for others.

The harvest is indeed plentiful. There's an increasing number of people in America who aren't connected to a community of faith. They don't yet know the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

25% of Gen-Xers—my generation, have no faith affiliation. 40% of Millennials have no faith affiliation. 13% of Generation Z (born after 2000) are atheist, while the national average is half of that, 6%. Sheep without a shepherd—the harassed and helpless and leaderless. But we have to make sure it's good news, not bad news, were proclaiming. These realities should move us to compassion and action—*splanchnizomai*.

Church, we need a gut check. The harvest is ready and waiting. We have plentiful opportunities to let Christ speak and act through us: meal-sharing, story-telling, story-listening, miracle-working, and prayer-travailing. Jesus is summoning us to cross boundaries, extend frontiers, and mend divisions. Jesus teaches us what to pray only a few times in the Scriptures. The Lord's Prayer is one of them. The other is here:

Pray for the Lord of the harvest that he would send forth laborers into his harvest.

It's a prayer directed to and answered by the church. Energized by prayer, we know God is with us and in us, to listen, to teach, to preach, and to heal—*Splanchnizomai-ing*. Then we train others to do the same.

Jesus needs you. Jesus needs us. God wants the world to hear and see the good news. But the world will never hear or see the good news, if no one tells them or shows them. We're Christ's hands, feet, and mouth. We're the Body of Christ. Early on in Martin Luther's ministry, he had a monk friend who had the same view of faith as Martin Luther. They made an agreement. Luther would go into the world with the good news. His monk friend would stay in the monastery and pray for Luther. This went on for a little while—until Luther's friend had a dream. He saw a vast field of corn—as big as the world. There was one man working in it. It was Martin Luther, all alone. It was an impossible task—back-breaking and heart-breaking.

"I must leave my prayers, and join the harvest with Martin."

There is power in prayer. We all need to pray—without ceasing. Some of us can only physically pray. If that's you, keep praying. Prayer moves mountains, God answers prayers. But not only God. The church is called by God to answer our prayers too. Yes, we're counting on Christ, but never forget. Never, ever forget: Christ is counting on us.

Amen.

Sermon Art: *"The Red Vineyard at Arles" (1888)* by Vincent Van Gogh

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