

Sheep Without a Shepherd

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Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Mark 6:30 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 31 He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. 32 And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.

34 As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

Mark 6:53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. 54 When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, 55 and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.

56 And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

A CROWD IN THE WILDERNESS

You may have noticed that there's a big gap in our lectionary lesson for today.

We skip all the way from verse 34 to verse 53.

I'm going to fill in the gap for you in the sermon.

In this particular case, we need to hear the whole story for our lesson to make sense.

You may remember that earlier Jesus sent the disciples out to do ministry in his name.

Well today they gather around Jesus and give him a report on what they had done and taught.

But, their report was cut short.

It seems that they may have been too successful.

The crowd that now followed them was very large.

In fact there were so many people coming and going that they didn't even have time to eat.

So Jesus said, "Let's go to a place that is not so crowded and rest for a while."

They got in the boat and sailed toward that deserted place on the other side of the Sea where there were no crowds and presumably no cell phone reception.

But, Jesus and his disciples are still not able to get the rest they need.

People saw them leave and guessed where they were headed. So, as they ran around the Sea of Galilee to meet Jesus and his disciples on the other side of the Sea, they also spread the word in other towns and villages.

And what did Jesus and his disciples see when they landed in that place that was supposed to be deserted?

They saw a "great crowd."

They are not alone in this wilderness.

In fact, the crowd had actually grown larger.

I wonder how the disciples may have responded to that sight of a great crowd in the wilderness.

Perhaps the disciples said something like,

"Oh no.

How did those guys get here?

We're never going to get any rest."

Maybe.

SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD

But, all we know is how Jesus responded to this great crowd.

The Bible tells us that Jesus had compassion on this great crowd for they were like “sheep without a shepherd.”

Why would people drop everything and run around the Sea of Galilee to a place that was deserted?

It was because they had a great spiritual need.
They had a hunger that even the blue plate special wouldn't satisfy.

Last week we talked about how fearful Herod killed the great prophet John the Baptist.

I suspect many in the crowd that day had been John's disciples. They were devastated by his death, and they needed someone to lead them.

They were indeed sheep without a shepherd.
So Jesus had compassion on them.

And how did Jesus show his compassion?
First, he taught them many things.
Jesus taught this great crowd in the wilderness about the Kingdom of God.

Since Jesus said that the people seemed like sheep without a shepherd, I wonder if Jesus might have used the 23rd Psalm as his text that day.

And in his sermon Jesus reminded the crowd that God cared about them.
He told them that they were not alone.

They are not sheep without a shepherd.
The Lord is their shepherd.

God is with them and for them.
God will guide them on their journey.
And God will provide what they need in the wilderness.

YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT

Whatever Jesus' sermon was about that day, it was running long, and his disciples came to him and said,

“Hey Jesus I hate to interrupt, but it's getting really late. This place is deserted and the crowds don't have anything to eat. It's time to wrap this up and send them home.

After all, we did come here to get away from these crowds and get a little rest...”

But, Jesus told his disciples something shocking. He said, “Hey, I've preached the sermon. Now you can give them something to eat.”

Have you ever tried to feed a great crowd on short notice? It's not easy. And feeding a great crowd is impossible in the wilderness.

The disciples pointed this out, but Jesus said, “Don't be so negative. Go see how much food we have on hand.”

So the disciples made a quick trip into the crowd and had their fears confirmed. In this huge crowd very few had packed a bag lunch. All they had was five loaves and two fish.

MORE THAN ENOUGH

But, before the disciples had a chance to tell Jesus “I told you so” Jesus had the crowds sit down on the green grass in groups of hundreds and fifties.

And then Jesus took what he had, five loaves and two fish, and gave thanks to God for what God had provided.

He broke the bread and divided the fish. And then, He gave this meager fare to his disciples, who in turn gave it to the people.

And what they had was enough.

In fact it was more than enough.

Everyone ate all that they wanted and there were twelve baskets of left-overs.

They had more food at the end of the meal than at the beginning.

Five thousand men were fed that day, not counting the women and the children.

CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN, SAILING THE SEA

But, they didn't have much time to savor their success.

Right away Jesus tells the disciples to get in the boat and sail to the other side of the Sea.

As the disciples sailed out of sight, Jesus also sent the crowd away.

Jesus waved goodbye to the grateful crowd.

And then Jesus was left all alone in the wilderness. He went up the mountain to pray.

(This little detail is reminiscent of Moses climbing the mountain to receive the commandments and experience the presence of God. For the first readers of Mark this would have been significant.)

If we were making a movie about this scene, as Jesus climbs the mountain, the sky grows dark, and the music becomes more brooding and foreboding. Jesus would glance out toward the sea. Storm clouds would be gathering.

And then the scene would switch to the sea of Galilee.

The wind is beginning to blow and the waves are starting to pound against the disciples' boat.

THEY DIDN'T RECOGNIZE HIM

The Bible tells us that this struggle against the wind and the waves lasts for hours. The exhausted disciples have not been able to go anywhere.

But, just as the morning light begins to break they see a ghostly figure walking on the water.

It's Jesus, but the disciples don't recognize him.

They cry out and Jesus (who was going to just keep walking). And Jesus says, "Don't be afraid. It's just me."

Jesus got in the boat with the disciples and the storm stopped immediately.

You could have knocked the disciples over with a feather.

You see, the disciples still didn't understand what it all meant. They still didn't recognize Jesus.

When Jesus was around, there would always be enough.

When Jesus was around, the storm would be stilled.

And when Jesus was not around they would make no headway against the storm.

It would take the disciples a long time before the disciples would really understand and recognize Jesus for who he was.

Indeed, it would only be after the resurrection that they would fully understand.

MORE CROWDS, NO REST

The exhausted disciples finally made it to dry land, a place called Genesaret on the northwest shore of Galilee.

I'm sure they just wanted the rest that Jesus had promised.

They were running on empty.

But, no sooner than Jesus had gotten out of the boat people recognized him.

These folks ran around the whole region spreading the word. And before long there was another huge crowd vying for Jesus' attention.

This time they brought the sick for Jesus to heal.
Some were so sick that they had to carry them on mats.

And it didn't make any difference where Jesus went.
Wherever he went, whether it was in the city or the country or the market-
place they begged Jesus for help. They said, "Just let me touch your cloak
and I'll be healed."

And they did.
And they were.

That's the whole story, and it's one story.
It's about disciples just want to get a little rest with Jesus.
But, it doesn't work out.

Too many people need to be fed.
Too many people need to be healed.
There's just no time for a spiritual retreat.

JESUS AND THE PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER

Preaching on this passage, John Killinger, a Presbyterian minister told this
story to a group of Presbyterian ministers at Princeton Seminary.

It seems that one day Jesus was walking down the road, and he saw a
man sitting on the curb crying.

Jesus asked, "What's wrong.?"
And the man said, "I'm blind."
Jesus reached out and touched him, and he could see again.

Jesus walked down the road a little farther and saw another man sitting on
the curb weeping.
Once again Jesus asked, "What's wrong?"
And the man said, "I'm lame."
Jesus reached out and touched him, and he could walk again.

Jesus walked down the road still farther and came upon yet another man
who was sitting on the curb crying.
Jesus asked for a third time, "What's wrong?"

And the man replied, "I'm a Presbyterian minister."

And Jesus sat down and wept with him.

EVERYONE WANTS A PIECE OF YOU

John told that illustration to illustrate what those ministers already knew. Ministry can be a very draining profession. It's life in the fish bowl, he said.

And then he corrected himself.
"No, it's life in the piranha bowl.
Everyone wants a piece of you."

Actually, that's not only true of ministers; it's also true of teachers and doctors and businessmen and tradespeople and mothers ... and you name it.

All of us have those days when it seems like life in the piranha bowl. Everyone wants a piece of us, and we just don't have any more to give. We are sailing against the storm and making absolutely no headway.

And if we continue to try and give when the well is dry we invite spiritual and psychological disaster.

SERVICE SPRINGING FROM HUNGER

But, oddly enough this time of spiritual drought can become a wellspring of compassion. Understanding how much we lack can be the beginning of abundance.

For, it is in the middle of a storm that we learn to cry out for help.

There are self help groups that meet in this church every week that operate on this principle, Alcoholics Anonymous and Al Anon. These people have been devastated by the storm of alcohol and drugs, but they band together and use their experience of loss to help each other find healing.

Look at the local paper, and you'll find other support groups that operate on this same principle.

There are divorce groups for those overwhelmed by the broken relationships. There are groups for those who have trouble with the demands of parenting. There are groups for those who are bereaved.

All of these groups allow people to use the hunger in their life as an impetus to feed others. They take what they have and give others a bite to eat.

Everyone here today is broken in some way.

On our own, we don't have the resources to feed ourselves, much less the crowd.

On our own we don't have the strength to make it through the storm.

When Jesus looked upon the great crowd in the wilderness and proclaimed that they were like sheep without a shepherd, he was talking about us as well.

But, the answer is not to sit down on the curb and cry and ask Jesus to join us. The answer is to band together and in faith use what we have for God's glory.

After all, as the apostle Paul reminds us,
"We are the body of Christ, and each one of us is a part of it."

The answer to hunger and fear and loneliness is to take one small step in faith.

Take that crusty loaf of bread and that little fish and share it with someone else in faith. Take what you've learned about fear and broken relationships and share it with someone else in faith.

I know. It's not enough. But, in the hands of Jesus it will be.

We do not share out of our abundance.
We share out of our hunger.

We bring what you have to Jesus, to the body of Christ, the church. And what we have, no matter how small will be enough.

PETER'S CHARGE AND OURS

One of the most messed up disciples in the Bible was the apostle Peter. Peter you'll remember denied his Lord three times before he was crucified. Peter was a broken man.

But, in John's gospel we read that the risen Christ came to Peter by the Sea of Tiberius.

And Jesus asked Peter the same question three times, "Do you you love me?"

Three times Peter denied Jesus and now three times Peter gets a chance to affirm his love for Jesus.

And when Peter affirms his love for Christ, each time Jesus says the same thing, "Feed my sheep."

The one who desperately needed to be fed with the love of Christ would become the one who would feed others. He would become the hands and heart of Christ in the world.

And that is our story as well.

In our need and in our love for Christ, we too can feed the sheep who need a shepherd.

A MIRACLE

When I was in Virginia we listened to a speaker at our Presbytery meeting who trained ministers in Central America. She told us a story about some peasants who were studying the Bible with a leader who was (as she put it) "a little bit sophisticated."

The leader expressed the idea that the "miracle" of the feeding of the 5,000 wasn't really a miracle at all. What really happened was that those who had a lot shared with those who had little.

One of the peasants thought for a while and then said, "Wow. That really would be a miracle."

This is the miracle that God wants to work in us. He has given us so much in Christ Jesus.

And now God wants us to share what we have with others, to have compassion on those who are like sheep without a shepherd.

Frederick Buechner put it this way,
“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

May God call us to that place where joy and hunger come together in service.

Amen.