

July 19, 2015

TEXT: Mark 6: 30–34, 53–56

TITLE: On the Move

Our Gospel lesson from today seems strange to me. When you look at the whole of the sixth chapter of Mark, you see a story rich with action: disciples sent out into the world, a famous teacher killed at the hands of a power hungry king, thousands fed with just a little bread, a Messiah walking on the water. This chapter is filled with the impossible. It paints a picture of the amazing work that God can do in this world: through ordinary disciples, through bread, through Jesus.

But the verses we are offered from the lectionary today sound more like filler texts. Instead of hearing THE story, today we get the words *around* the story. In fact, the lectionary writers skip right over the feeding of the 5000 and the story of Jesus walking on the water to give us the lesson for today: the stuff of everyday life—of some regular folks trying slow down, just trying to take a break in the midst of one wild ride.

Our story begins with Jesus greeting the disciples upon their return from their first missionary venture. They are excited and exhausted. They have stories to tell, thoughts to process. They are spent. And Jesus has news to share of John's beheading. There is a lot to talk about, a lot to unpack. So Jesus ushers them away, out of the town to a quiet place where they might rest for awhile.

But like fans who get wind of the hotel where the hottest boy band is staying, the crowds rush ahead to greet Jesus and his friends. They get ahead of them on their journey, so that the crowds are there when they arrive on their retreat. Their time in seclusion has become the setting for a great miracle—the only miracle covered by all four gospel writers. Thousands gather to see Jesus, to hear his teachings, to be healed, to be fed.

The disciples' Sabbath is postponed, all because Jesus takes compassion on the crowds. The Good Shepherd sees that the multitudes who have chased after them have run to them out of their need. So a banquet is prepared. People are taught. The sick are healed. The disciples get back to work. Life goes on. This is one of those types of days of which John Lennon was thinking when he wrote: "Life is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans."

We all know that feeling—that feeling of a detour. We spent months planning a family vacation, and a child gets the flu two days in. We are about to put dinner on the table when a friend calls crying. We are working through our to do list in the office, when our cell phone buzzes to say that Mom's in the hospital—get there fast.

But even when we are not in crisis mode, our lives still are filled with a million distractions. In fact, we often set ourselves up for such disruptions. We eat dinner at restaurants with our cell phones sitting on the table, awaiting the next intrusion. Our alerts sound when we receive an email that we check at a red light. And even when we don't, we have this inescapable awareness that we are somehow expected to be available, everywhere, always.

We so easily see ourselves in the disciples' story. We have all had moments when we have felt the world pressing in on us and we've needed to respond. We have all needed to put our own needs aside and get about the work of tending: to the skinned knee or bruised ego or the revised deadline at work. We recognize the need for Sabbath, and we want Jesus to invite US to a deserted place where we can rest for awhile. We want the Good Shepherd to keep an eye of things, because with him in charge we know that we can give ourselves permission to catch a little rest.

The problem with this picture is that, in this story at least, Jesus doesn't let the disciples rest. The best laid plans are changed in a moment's notice when the crowds, literally, get ahead of them. Jesus is moved by compassion and starts to minister to their needs. And the disciples are called to help too. In fact, in the missing verses from our text, Jesus even invites the disciples to do the impossible. When hungry crowds are gathered around, Jesus says to the disciples: "YOU give them something to eat." (Mark 6:37).

Perhaps the lesson we are to learn today isn't about any of the main characters in our text – anyone who has a name. Perhaps we are to notice, in these verses pulled outside of the story, the persistent crowd who chased after and ran ahead of Jesus—the men, women and children who dropped everything to sit at Jesus' feet.

Who are these people who change even *Jesus'* plans? Who are these unnamed individuals who reroute the disciples not once, but twice (that is where the whole story is helpful here!)? What is it about them that moves the Living God to shift focus from mentoring his beloved disciples and pulls him into a place of tender care? *What is so compelling about these crowds that they command an audience with Jesus and are healed?*

Our text says: "Jesus had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd." They needed guidance, they needed healing, they needed hope. But one thing the text shows us is that the crowds *knew it*. They knew their need. They knew their lack. And they knew that Jesus was the answer. And so they pursued him—persistently and hopefully. They chased after Jesus like a thirsty man chases water. They walked and they walked and they were not going to give up.

Many in this world wander around lost—not knowing to whom they could turn; not knowing what to make of their lives; not knowing how to dig themselves out of the problems they face. Many of us have had moments of feeling lost too.

But the crowds in our story have the gumption to do something about it—to humbly and wholly admit their need. They don't try to get up, rub some dirt on their wounds, and get back in the game as we are often taught to do. They do not put their mind on other things as we often try. They are honest with themselves. They are honest with one another. And in the face of their truth they pursue the one who is the truth incarnate, trusting that if they could just see him, hear him, or touch the hem of his garment, that they will be made well.

The crowds chase after Jesus. They plan their route and even beat him to his destination. They are ready to receive him. They are open and available to him. They are hungry for the nourishment that he alone can offer—whether bread and fish or words of life.

What are we chasing after in our lives? There are many things that command our attention and our energy. Many of these demands are necessary because we live in a civil society that requires things like jobs and money to make sure that we have food and shelter. But what is it that we are CHASING? What or whom has our full attention? What or whom has captivated our hearts? What or whom has the power to change our lives?

Journalist Pico Iyer writes:

When I was growing up and I was going to overpriced colleges, they were always telling us, “You’ve got to accumulate a wonderful resume, you’ve got to climb this hurdle and this hurdle and this hurdle, become partner, become editor-in-chief, become Supreme Court judge.” And that seems to lead to permanent dissatisfaction, because once you become a Supreme Court judge, you want to become the head of the court in the Hague, or once you get the Pulitzer Prize you want the Nobel Prize, so there’s never any end to that craving. So I think going nowhere in some ways seemed to me a more promising alternative than always trying to get somewhere.¹

We chase after ambition, recognition, wealth and power. We chase after lower interest rates and financial security in retirement. We chase after fashion trends, fitness crazes, popularity of all kinds. We chase after that which is harder to quantify but which shapes our lives: things like the maintenance of systems that assert our privilege. We chase after the possibility that we are number one—if not in our field, than at least in our own home. We chase after health, happiness, and we chase after love.

¹ <http://ideas.ted.com/want-to-be-happy-slow-down/>

But what if we rerouted the chase? What if we set a different destination in our Google maps? What if, instead, we pursued a wholeness that comes from Christ alone? What about if we chased after the presence and power of Living God? What if we placed our hope in him? What about if we put everything aside to meet him? What if we had the guts to humbly put it all out there: our brokenness and our need; our woundedness and the wounds we have caused? What if we made an encounter with Christ the highest priority in our lives? And what if we invited others to come and follow him too?

See, we too are in need of a Good Shepherd. We need someone to guide us, to heal us, to make us whole. Thomas Merton writes:

We must be saved from immersion in the sea of lies and passions which is called “the world.” And we must be saved above all from that abyss of confusion and absurdity which is our own worldly self. The person must be rescued from the individual...The creative and mysterious inner self must be delivered from the wasteful...and destructive ego that seeks only to cover itself with disguises.²

We too are in need of a Savior. We need Jesus.

Our lectionary reminds us that sometimes we need to step out of the story to see the big picture. Sometimes we need to stop and notice all that commands our attention in order to reprioritize our focus.

Our text invites us to shift our gaze and shift our energy that we might draw near to Christ and be made whole. And in doing so, we see from the text that we are likewise drawn deeper into community. Unnamed people approached Jesus *in community* in our text. They gathered in crowds—pointing each other to Jesus, finding the route and helping each other in the journey. When we approach Jesus *together*, we can see the good worked out in the lives of others and the potential for true justice, authentic compassion and lasting peace.

May we approach Christ today: humbly, transparently—and together. May we come to Christ in prayer. May we follow Christ’s example to love. May we encounter Christ in the Word. May we engage Christ as we love another, showing compassion to those in need and in doing so, seeing Christ’s face. Then maybe we can sit together on the hillside, on the green grass, and all of us be fed—seeing with our own eyes that there is enough, there is enough, there is more than enough for all.

² Merton, Thomas. *New Seeds of Contemplation*. P 38