

## **A Sermon for Sunday July 18, 2021**

### **In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer:**

“Come away and rest awhile. . .”

“He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.”

As I was preparing for today’s sermon one of the commentaries, I read, suggested that Mark, though he did not use the words God’s Kingdom in the gospel reading, he was in fact referring to it. I thought about a quote from Brian McLaren which I shared a few weeks ago about how God’s kingdom turns all of our expectations about kingdoms upside down. To remind us, a bit of what he said. In God’s Kingdom “order becomes opportunity, stability becomes change, vengeance and threats are transformed into forgiveness and blessing.” Elsewhere we read that Jesus’ coming into the world is the very “breaking in” of God’s Kingdom. Jesus shares many stories that show us new ways to see and understand God’s Kingdom. Looking at today’s lessons through that sort of lens then the whole of what Jesus was doing with his disciples was teaching them and us about the kingdom through his own actions as well as his words. His disciples were actually attending a master class on how to live into and share the message of God’s kingdom in the here and now as well as to be prepared for what was to come.

When Jesus’ disciples returned from their first mission, I imagine they returned excited. Though Mark’s gospel gives us no description of their state of mind. I imagine if we were there that we could have heard the excitement in their voices and seen it on their glowing faces. Each Sunday when we leave here to go home to live our lives; we too are sent out to do mission, to serve God in the world. Each week we hear these words in the post communion prayer “Send us now into the world in peace to do your work of reconciliation as faithful witnesses of Christ.” And in the blessing, we hear these words: “Be of good courage. Hold fast to that which is good. Render no one evil for evil. Strengthen the fainthearted. Support the weak. Help the afflicted. Honor all persons. Love and serve God.” What would we have to report to Jesus about our mission, about our service? Jesus was not asking for a report as in homework assignment. He wanted to know how it

went. Because as they shared what happened, what they saw, what they heard, they were practicing the work they were called to do, and they were learning how to support one another. He knew they would not have him with them as they moved forward. They would have only one another, as well as the memory of what Jesus taught them about mutual support and trust in God.

As they spoke and he listened, I suspect he could feel their exhaustion. To be with people in the midst of their pain is to suffer a bit with them. We know from the story of Jesus with the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years that the moment she touched the hem of his cloak he felt power drain from him. When we reach out, when we are fully present, we too can feel our energy, our power drain from us.

I remember reading something from Richard Rohr years ago about the work he used to do with young social activists. They were doing wonderful work for the poor and others in need. However, few of them took care of themselves. They became physically, emotionally, and spiritually drained. They did not take the time to be in the presence of God away from their ministries. He found many burnt themselves out after only a few years. It is partly from that early experience that he founded the Center for Action and Contemplation. He wanted to create something that would train people in spiritual practices that would help sustain them in their ministries. How do we feed our souls that we might serve God and feed others?

Jesus seeing their exhaustion invites them to join him in the same practice he has been doing throughout his time with them. After a time of healing and teaching Jesus would go off to pray to be alone. He says to them “Come away with me to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile.” The word “rest” used here means “bodily rest.” They were weary from their travels and exertions along the road. I imagine we all know something about that sort of weariness after any busy time in our lives. Certainly, as our bodies grow older, we need more time to rest and to replenish our strength. Whenever we rest our bodies I believe our spirits, our hearts, our minds get rest as well. Jesus went off to pray. What do we do to replenish our bodies? Our spirits?

As it turns out and the story continues, they had no real opportunity to rest. As they took off in a boat to go to a place to rest, people see them, recognize them and Jesus from their travels. They hurry along from the towns and surrounding

area. The boat is easy to spot from the shore. The possible stopping places are known. As Jesus steps ashore they are waiting for him. I have this image of the pictures of fans who wait outside hotels and performance venues to be there as the star comes out. They wait to get an autograph or snap a picture, maybe even to touch their idol. We all have seen old pictures of those frantic scenes, I am sure. The people gathered to see and hear Jesus are not that sort of fan nor are they paparazzi. They are people in need of healing. Jesus does not refuse to speak to or to be with them. The needed rest will have to wait. "He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." The word here for compassion is of the gut-wrenching connection he has with them. His compassion is a compassion that meets them in their place of suffering and pain. He literally feels their pain and reaches out to them. It is interesting that here we do not hear about Jesus healing them. Instead he teaches them. Teaches them I imagine about God's love for them, about God's forgiveness, about God's ongoing presence in their lives. They are the poor, the ones at the edges. They are ordinary people like us. In need of a God who listens to their needs and is there in their pain. Sometimes we just need to be heard to be healed. Mark does not share the words of Jesus teaching here. He leaves that to the imagination of the reader. Letting them, letting us fill in the blanks. He is the Good Shepherd feeding his sheep. What do we need to hear?

As usual Mark packs a lot into his chapters as he moves the story along. One commentator reminds us that this passage leads to the story of the feeding of the five thousand which we will hear about next week. Jesus and his disciples never get the chance to rest after the feeding before they are off again moving by boat to the area and town of Gennesaret. Which is only three miles from Capernaum. I have stood at the edge of the Sea of Galilee. Stood there and looked out over the sea. They would not have traveled far from the water's edge, you can easily see boats in the water from the shore or from rises in the land overlooking the sea. The story is the same at this next stop. Crowds gather. He walks into towns, into their marketplaces which are more than places where goods are bought and sold. The word here is "agora". It is a public space where legal hearings, elections and debates take place. In Capernaum, the local synagogue is right next to the market. We hear today that people brought their sick and laid them out on mats to wait to be healed in this very public space, not a roadside hill or beach by the sea.

Elizabeth Webb writes in a commentary on today's gospel, "The verse about identifying as the true divine shepherd who will guide his sheep into the kingdom, and the nature of that kingdom coming through healings is one that disrupts the economy of the world." Another commentator writes more "While the marketplaces of the world belong to the rich and powerful, in the kingdom of God this most political and commercial of spaces is occupied by those with the least, in the age to come, Jesus proclaims; the first will be last and the last first. That age, God's kingdom age is breaking into this age, we who seek to live God's kingdom here and now must follow Jesus' subversion of worldly power and wealth." Mark's setting of the healings in the public marketplace further set up his story about what will happen next to Jesus. Those watching these healings happen, those in authority, the religious and secular authority could not have missed the implications of what was happening.

They came to Jesus, followed him from their own towns. They came to those marketplaces out of their need, bringing with them others who needed help. They all came for healing. They believed, as the woman who had been bleeding believed, that if they but touched the fringe of his clothes they would be healed. Here the word for healing "sozo" means "saved." They would be saved from whatever ailed them physically or otherwise.

Compassion and prayer, action and rest. It is not an either or. It is both and.

Henri Nouwen wrote," Prayer and action . . . can never be seen as contradictory or mutually exclusive. Prayer without action grows powerless pietism, and action without prayer degenerates into questionable manipulation. If prayer leads us to deeper unity with the compassionate Christ, it will give rise to concrete acts of service. And if concrete acts of service do indeed lead us to a deeper solidarity with the poor, the hungry, the sick, the dying, and the oppressed, they will always give rise to prayer. In prayer we meet Christ, and in him all human suffering. In service we meet people, and in them the suffering Christ. . . ."

Roy Almquist wrote in a commentary on today's passage "How can we do God's work without sometime to practice the presence of God in our lives? Prayer and devotion that does not lead to practical action for good is simply self-indulgence."

Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry offers us the “Way of Love Practices.” Which I have shared before: Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, Rest.

“**Turn:** pause, listen and choose to follow Jesus. **Learn:** read on scripture each day, especially on Jesus’ life and teachings. **Pray:** Dwell intentionally with God each day. **Worship:** Gather in community weekly to thank, praise and dwell with God. **Bless:** Share faith and unselfishly give and serve. **Go:** Cross boundaries, listen deeply and live like Jesus. **Rest:** Receive the gift of God’s grace, peace and restoration. And remember these are practices. There is no test, no report card.

How do we take the time to be present with God? How does that feed our needs that we might then reach out to others in need? May we be a part of ushering in God’s Kingdom now.”