

Sister Ann Shultz

July 18, 2021 ~ Lectionary 16B

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

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<sup>30</sup>The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. <sup>31</sup>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. <sup>32</sup>And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. <sup>33</sup>Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. <sup>34</sup>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.

<sup>53</sup>When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. <sup>54</sup>When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, <sup>55</sup>and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. <sup>56</sup>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 lot happens in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark. The disciples are sent out on their first mission trip. John the Baptist is gruesomely killed, and his head ends up on a platter. Jesus feeds the 5,000, and walks on water. By comparison, today's readings may seem kind of "meh". They really do not stack up in the drama department.**

**But even if today's readings completely miss the boat when it comes to drama, there are still a few things we can learn from today's gospel reading - namely the importance of rest and renewal, compassion, and perhaps even a little bit about sheep.**

**This morning's story begins with the disciples coming back together with Jesus after being sent out in groups of two to heal the sick and broken, cast out demons, and teach people about the kingdom of God. Now they have returned and are sharing their experiences with Jesus. We can imagine that their experiences must have ranged from mountain top highs to outright rejection and ridicule.**

Rev. Sharon Hiers imagined how an artist might depict the disciple's return from their first independent adventure.

“With brilliant brush strokes on a large canvas, the scene could be painted for this tender moment. The largest object would be the tree covered in hues of green leaves, that are dancing in the gentle evening sunlight. Collapsed beneath it, bathed in its generous shade, the apostles gather around Jesus, exhausted from their recently frantic lives.

The scars of their travels cover their bodies.... Without a traveling food supply, they were dependent on the kindness of strangers for a simple meal. These men are thinner than before, their ribs exposed through torn clothing, the same garments they departed in.

Most of them have tan lines running across their feet, where their sandals--now removed--once pressed in. The soles of their sandals are worn thin -- evidence of the miles they had covered, and the number of times the sand had been knocked off on an inhospitable doorstep.

These men are reclining next to Jesus. You feel they have been telling him story after story, of how many people they were able to help, and of the many lives that been restored. They are

nestled into the green grass that covers the landscape, staring up into the white clouds dotting the perfectly blue sky.

Just on the left side of the canvas is a lake, still and quiet, yet the remnants of a storm linger far in the distance. Just at the edge of the water is a boat, one that has weathered many storms, but is strong and sturdy, and ready to hold the apostles, and all their cares.

On the front of that boat is a basket overflowing with all different kinds of food, including fruits and meats, and the finest bread ever made.

However, if you look on the other side of that lake, just barely recognizable, there seems to be a crowd of people heading this direction.

Then, on the other side of the canvas, off in the distance, you can faintly see another crowd coming into view. They know where Jesus and his disciple are, and they will soon be within earshot - demanding attention and compassion from them all.

The artist has painted Jesus as the only one whose face is turned towards the crowds. His expression is one of knowing, and without a hint of panic that the disciples may have noticed.

Besides, most of them are gazing into the sky as they remember their adventures, reflecting on their work, feeling their exhaustion, and one or two are already fast asleep.”

Jesus knew that the disciples needed some rest and a time of renewal. Jesus himself took time to go away and modeled the importance of sabbath rest. I wonder if perhaps the pandemic has taught people the importance of taking time for rest and renewal? In our society, people tend to be judged by what they do rather than who they are. And don't we also judge ourselves the same way? How often do we feel like we just can't get enough done? I know I often do! Perhaps, the forced break in busy-ness brought about by the pandemic has been a welcome relief for our chronically over-scheduled lives. Now, as we are eager come back together again and restart all of the activities that we have missed over the past 14 months, let's remember the importance of taking time away for some holy rest.

Now, lets go back to that painting. Jesus's eyes where focused on the approaching crowds with compassion. Jesus had compassion for the people. He did not send them away, but

instead he taught the crowds and healed them. Jesus is like the police officer in the following story:

**"A police officer was on Time's Square in New York during rush hour. Thousands of people were thronging and pushing at the corner ready to cross at the intersection. Ten lanes of cars were backed up for blocks screeching their tires and racing their motors waiting for the light to change.**

**Suddenly, a mother cat came out of an alley followed by her four little kittens. She started across that busy intersection. The police officer dashed out in the middle of the traffic, risking his life and safety, and stopped the cars and the people, and allowed that mother cat and her kittens to safely cross the street. Everyone stopped and watched this brave act exhibited by the police officer, and the calm manner in which that cat and her kittens crossed the busy intersection, because of the sacrificial caring of that police officer."**

**Compassion is not always easy. Compassion is an act of sacrificial love, and to love means making ourselves vulnerable. In "the Four Loves, author C.S Lewis writes, "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of**

keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or to at least the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love is Hell.”

So, how about those sheep? In Jeremiah, God promises to gather up the scattered sheep and provide good and caring shepherds. In psalm 23 we read that the Lord is our shepherd; and Jesus calls himself the “Good Shepherd” In Mark, Jesus had great compassion for the people because they were like sheep without a shepherd. This image may not be the most helpful in 2021. Most of us have not had a lot of experience with sheep. Maybe a more modern metaphor would be that the people were like fabric scraps without a quilter, or wood without a carpenter – stray pieces lacking the guidance to be made whole.

**But I still think we can learn something from sheep - especially one little lamb named Spaghetti. Spaghetti belonged to a friend of mine. She was a cute little lamb, but not the brightest animal in the barnyard. Spaghetti could never seem to find her mother, no matter how hungry she was. Her mom would bleat and cry for her, but Spaghetti would not come to her. My friend decided she was going to have to hand feed this little lamb with bottles of goat's milk. Three times a day, she would go outside to feed Spaghetti, and every time, that little lamb would run away and have to be chased down and caught. When she finally was caught, she would settle down in her shepherd's lap and enjoy her yummy meal. The next meal, Spaghetti ran away and had to be chased down again. This little lamb had to be chased down every single time! And every time her good and faithful shepherd would find her, gather her up, and care for her and give her what she needed. I think that we are all sometimes a lot like Spaghetti - running away from Jesus when he has something wonderful to give to us.**

**Let's revisit that painting one more time. Where do you see yourself in the painting? Are you exhausted and resting in**



**Jesus's presence? Are you the lost sheep wondering off the side of the canvas? Perhaps you are watching the approaching crowds with compassion? Or perhaps that compassion is mixed with feeling overwhelmed or anxious. Wherever you find yourself today, take some time to rest in Jesus' presence. Then, when you are ready, go out with a renewed sense of compassion and peace to serve those that God puts in your path.**