

Ephesians 2:11-22
Mark 6:30-34;53-56

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
July 19, 2009, 16th Sun. in Ord. Time

No R&R for Jesus

In one of my daily devotionals this morning, I read something we all know but tend to put in the back of our minds. “If we neglect to dispense compassion to ourselves, our ability to serve diminishes.” The writer was talking about caregiver exhaustion and was suggesting a change of environment to restore creativity and perspective. She ended by saying, “We have permission to pause and be refreshed.” That brings to mind an old Coca Cola tagline “The pause that refreshes.” Jesus and His disciples need that, as do we.

Interruptions are often a problem. A carefully planned day can quickly fall apart when one thing after another interferes with our schedule. Our valuable time is used up by repeated interruptions which break our train of thought and detour our attention. This seems to be true for most people. Handling interruptions gracefully becomes something which many of us hope to do. It is instructive to look at these verses and watch Jesus as He deals with the demands of the crowds which force a change in His plans.

We have two different stories in these verses, each with an important role. The first story begins with the report of the disciples on their mission throughout the surrounding villages and then quickly becomes the setting for Jesus’ spectacular feeding of the five thousand. Following the feeding and the unusual account of Jesus’ walking on the water, the second story gives a summary of Jesus’ activities in and around Gennesaret, kind of a transition to the upcoming debate with the scribes about Jewish tradition.

In the first section, the disciples have been on their missionary journeys, traveling in separate pairs, and seem to need a debriefing. They are undoubtedly tired from their travels but have marvelous stories to tell of healings and teachings. So they give their reports to Jesus. He listens for a time; and then, knowing their exhaustion and acknowledging His own tiredness, Jesus suggests they escape to a deserted place for a rest. What a wonderful idea! The crowds are so constant that there is no suitable time or place to even eat. Jesus and his tired but excited disciples sail to a distant and deserted shore to share stories and rest. But Christ's plans are frustrated! Large crowds of people run along the shore and beat the boat to its landing. Personal privacy, which Jesus cherishes for times of spiritual renewal and teaching, is impossible. He now belongs to the public, and crowds will follow His steps wherever He goes.

Jesus' encounter with the crowds is a study in itself. Compassion arises within Him as He sees the same signs in the crowd which He has often seen in a flock of sheep which has lost its shepherd. The lost sheep make noisy bleatings which border on hysteria and aimless wandering which signals hopelessness. Jesus understands the hungers and the hazards of a crowd. With the compassion of a shepherd, He responds to them.

But the crowds are not so easily left behind. They keep an eye on the boat and hurry ahead to Christ's favorite spot and arrive before Jesus and His disciples. The presence of the crowds often messes with Jesus' plans to retreat and with the need for time away from the relentless demands of the crowds. The crowds seem to always be interrupting.

Yet, without a shepherd, sheep are directionless, dumb, and defenseless animals. The comparison seems a little strong for a “flock” of human beings, until we understand the psychology of large crowds of people. Without a leader, a crowd is similar to a tumbleweed, twisting and turning in different directions, depending on the gust of wind. Imagine thousands of people gathering on the shore as Jesus and His disciples leave in their boat. Suddenly, someone in the crowd starts to run; others follow; and soon thousands are stampeding along the shore. Mass hysteria is a phenomenon which accounts for many deaths and injuries at sports or other spectator events. There is no one to blame because no one really knows how it started. Large groups of people hunger for a leader to give them direction.

Of all the animals, sheep are possibly the most vulnerable. Senselessly, they will wander away from the flock to become easy prey for wolves and other predators. Futilely, they will pick over wastelands and starve, unless the shepherd leads them to green pastures. People are equally vulnerable. They can be turned by a leader, a voice, or a protector to the uses of good or evil.

Jesus and His disciples surely have no reason for impatience. But the text tells us that when Jesus sees the crowd, He has compassion for them, because they are like sheep without a shepherd. Instead of being an interruption in His R&R, the crowd becomes the object of Jesus’ deep concern. He sees their aimless wandering, their desperation as persons without direction and commitment, and He begins to teach them. Jesus Christ interprets, instructs, and encourages the people to see a better way.

Out of compassion, Jesus chooses to help the crowds who press in around Him on the Galilean shores. Because of their circumstances, He could have misled them for His own purposes by the power of His personality. Christ's integrity will never permit it. There is no shred of evidence in His ministry which points to Jesus violating the freedom or the dignity of people in order to work His will. Mark tells us that Jesus helps the people by teaching them, organizing them, speaking for them, and feeding them. He becomes their leader, their voice, and their protector, but not without allowing them to be free to decide whether they believe He is the Messiah or just a miracle-worker who serves a good meal!

It is amazing how Jesus handles these interruptions in His life and in the life of His disciples, how His compassion for the interrupters overrides His concern for His schedule. In time, He will dismiss the crowds and find His own moments alone to pray, but not before He is shepherd to the shepherdless.

Few of us can handle interruptions with the grace and compassion Jesus does. In fact, it may be better to read this story from the perspective of the crowd, one of those whose frantic and often unfocused life desperately seeks an answer. Jesus seems to never be disturbed by our interruptions, by our constant need of His compassion and teaching. In fact, Christ seems to welcomes us. This text affirms His extraordinary availability.

In the other part of the passage, Mark simply describes Jesus' enormous popularity and the pressing crowds wherever He goes. Out of all the areas of Jesus' ministry – preaching, teaching, healing the sick, casting out

demons, raising the dead, feeding the multitudes – the people identify Him mainly as a healer. Jesus Christ’s ministry of healing is unique. First, those who have touched Him are made well. Jesus responds to everyone who approaches Him without bias of any kind. Second, He does not force healing on anyone. His availability and their determination to touch Him are part of the healing process. Third, being made well has a couple meanings: one is freedom from disease which can enslave a person; and the other is the wholeness which comes to those who touch Christ. These same criteria can be applied to the witness of Christians today.

Mark demonstrates how there are no obstacles in the way Christ restores health of afflicted people. These folks have no reluctance about whom He is or what is about to prevent their openness to His ministry. Their need and His touch are all that matter.

Mark shows us that Jesus’ compassion is important in ministering to the thankless crowds, the hardened disciples, and selfish sick people. Some of these are the same people whom we tend to block out with a dismissive wave of our hand. May we use our ministry of compassion in the opportunities Christ gives us every day. May we re-affirm our church’s reputation as a “servant” by continuing to reach out to others through the programs we already have and expand them where possible. Mark’s Gospel points to Jesus as our role model. Christ asks us to follow wherever He leads us. May we continue to love, obey, and serve Christ always with compassion as He shows us. Amen.