

July 22 – Pentecost +9

Jeremiah 23:1-6

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jeremiah+23:1-6>

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+6:30-56>

For the third week in a row our gospel reading is taken from Mark 6. Earlier this month we started this important chapter by looking at Jesus' rejection at Nazareth; then we moved onto the account of John the Baptist being beheaded. One of the themes we've explored so far is that our little deeds of kindness are important in God's mission and ministry in the world, that our actions are a response to God's holy invitation. God has chosen us and invited us to be partners in ministry. Yet sometimes we might find ourselves in challenging situations, struggling between doing what we know is right by God and on the other hand trying to maintain some kind of societal image or reputation. King Herod finds himself in a very difficult situation when he makes a promise in front of many guests at a banquet, and is forced to choose between morals and social image.

Now even though we're still in Mark 6 this week, what's really surprising isn't the verses that are included but the ones that are omitted. We read verses 30-34, which is right where we left off last week, but then we skip ahead to verses 53-56 where this chapter in Mark's gospel finally ends. What the lectionary fails to include this week are the stories of Jesus feeding the 5000, and Jesus walking on water. These are pretty significant stories, so why wouldn't we look at them today? There might be several reasons why the selections are what they are, but let's look at what we have.

The disciples have returned from their journeys. Remember that after Jesus' rejection at Nazareth He sends out the disciples to begin their ministries immediately after they witness that effort and goodwill doesn't always translate into conversion and success. So upon their return Jesus says let's get away and rest for a bit, maybe to get filled in on their adventures and experiences in a quiet place away from the crowds. So they get into a boat and head off for a place of solitude and rest, but people start to notice them. People recognize these are those men who were saying such and such about this Jesus they had been following. They figure out that Jesus and His disciples must be headed over to a certain area, so they take another way there and show up before Jesus' boat.

Imagine you're in the boat. You've been diligent in spreading news about Jesus, acting as a herald for this good news. Maybe some people are interested in what you're talking about...others laugh at you or just ignore you. In any case you keep pressing on. You've been so busy you can't remember the last time you even had time to eat, and now that you've returned Jesus says you're all headed for some rest at a quiet place. Finally! Some peace and quiet, this is going to be more than just a welcome idea. As you're in the boat you see a few folks in the distance, but not too many. But the closer you get, you see crowds gathering. Getting closer and closer to the shore, you can see the hundreds of people. What would you do? How would you feel, or react?

We don't know what the disciples said or thought, but we have Jesus' reaction. 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. Jesus was compassionate, and began to teach.

This verse emphasizes Jesus' identity as the true, divine shepherd, the one who will guide God's people.<sup>1</sup> This verse emphasizes Jesus' compassion over and above His other abilities or qualities. Perhaps that's why we're not reading about the feeding of the 5000, or Jesus walking on water. We know about Jesus' divine power, His ability to do supernatural things, those abilities to do things that make us pause and wonder. Maybe we need a reminder about Jesus' other qualities, His more human ones like patience and compassion.

We might consider Jesus' compassion ordinary, but it was not commonplace among leaders. Think about our passage from Jeremiah. God says, "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" God chastises the leaders of Israel who were false shepherds and leaders, who scattered the flock, and drove them away. God remembers the promise made, where a leader of David's line will be just and righteous, a true leader and not just a figurehead. Think about some of the differences between Herod and Jesus. Herod throws a party and mercilessly kills God's messenger, John the Baptist. Jesus has compassion for the people, draws close to them, feeds the crowds, and leads with justice and righteousness. Herod is concerned with power and his public image, while Jesus is focused on God's ministry of reconciliation and wholeness for all peoples.

The Greek word for compassion has its root in a word that means "guts" and the seat of feeling. "Feeling it in your gut." We all know that feeling – where your reaction to something really gets at your core. You don't just feel it emotionally, you feel it physically too. That's compassion – a visceral feeling. Jesus has compassion because the crowd – the men, the women, the children – are like sheep without a shepherd. If we unpack those words, they're lost, the people lack guidance. But even more than that, they're in need of care, of protection, of pasture, of tending, of nurture.<sup>2</sup> Jesus knows their needs and it hits Him at His core, He feels compassion for these people, God's people, His people.

I think this was another teaching moment for Jesus' disciples. Earlier they learn about Jesus' rejection at Nazareth before they're sent out. And when they return, exhausted, and desperately wanting to rest and have some quiet time, they're met by a crowd of people with so many needs. And Jesus had to show His followers that compassion is essential to discipleship. Compassion is required love and persist. It hits you in the gut and sends you into motion for the sake of the other. Think about the word 'compassion', its etymology -- to have sympathy with, co-suffering, passion together.<sup>3</sup>

I believe this is what's at the heart of today's readings. Sympathy, co-suffering, compassion. God has compassion for Israel, God has been longing to gather His people to

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2540](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2540) Webb

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3656> Lewis

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Himself despite their stubbornness and poor leaders over the many years. God has been sending prophets like Ezekiel, Amos, and Jeremiah to call the people back to faithfulness, and in the fullness of time God sends Himself and enters in to the world through Jesus. This marks the culmination of so many things. Years of waiting, years of patience; years of the people suffering under unsympathetic kings and conquerors. Jesus embodies sympathy, He suffers alongside of others and on His own, He is compassionate in the true sense of a shepherd.

It's so easy to overlook, or pass over, that verse, "As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" – maybe that's why the lectionary cut out the other stories, so we could really hone in on the importance of compassion, because I think it's the difference maker for a lot of things. Compassion was the difference between getting on shore and being with the people, or staying in the boat and heading somewhere else. Compassion was the difference between those families, those men, women, and children in the crowd having an encounter with Jesus that day. Is it possible that compassion might even be the difference between what we do and don't do?

Let's think about that for a moment. Is compassion the difference between what we choose to do and what we leave aside?

This past week was VBS/Camp on the Road. It was only 4 days, Monday – Thursday, and as many of you know Mondays are usually the day I take off. I was feeling kind of tired from the week leading up to it, and the weekend wasn't particularly restful, so do you know what I did on Monday? I slept in, I took the day off, I rested, I did the things I wanted to do, I got not one but two chocolate chip muffins from the mall that make them just the way my favourite place in Toronto made them...and I was selfish! We can call it self-care instead of selfish, maybe it was a bit of both rather than one or the other, but the point is I didn't go to VBS on Monday. I went for the other days, and I'm glad I did, not just to ease my guilt, but because it was a learning opportunity for me too.

VBS is well-supported, by people from our parish, from Camp Medley, from grandparents or caregivers to the kids who attend the week, and many others in the community like the Lions Hall and folks behind the scenes preparing food, helping on the BBQ. But something I realized only because I was there is that there are a lot of chances to be compassionate and sympathetic, and not I'm not just talking about the kids. There were opportunities to share someone's pain and allow someone else to share in your own. And yes there were chances to be compassionate for the children, who at times can be like sheep without a shepherd. I don't mean kids that wandered off, or seemed like they desperately needed some safety and protection. I'm talking about the ones who just need to feel like they're appreciated or they matter. I know I've said this before, even just a couple of weeks ago, but I want you to know that you matter. I want you to know that you're valued and important here in this community and to God, our shepherd.

Compassion is an extraordinary virtue that's available to ordinary people like you and me. Compassion is what underlies God's love and grace, not pity or disappointment, but a deep-seated sense of closeness so that when we hurt, God feels that hurt too. Compassion is co-

suffering, and collaborative, and affects our faith community. So don't be afraid to be vulnerable with one another. Don't be shy about the challenges you're facing, or asking for help. Churches are centered on Christ, on community, on love and compassion.

Earlier I asked if compassion is the difference between what we choose to do and what we leave aside? You can tell me what you think, or chat about it over coffee. We can't walk on water, or feed thousands of people with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish, but what might happen when we respond to each other, and those around us, with compassion? May we try to be compassionate and faithful as the One who created us is compassionate and faithful. Amen.