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July 18, 2021 – 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

<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.

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our heavenly Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I don't know about you, but when I heard the gospel text for today, it just felt a little “underwhelming” when compared to the stories we've heard in the last few weeks. In just the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark alone, we hear about Jesus being rejected in his hometown, the 12 apostles being sent out 2-by-2 on a mission where they cast out demons and heal people, John the Baptist is killed, and in the stories we skip over today (because you will hear them from John's gospel next week), Jesus feeds a crowd of 5,000 and then walks on water. With all of that drama, perhaps that is why these two stories of Jesus seems minor in comparison to Jesus' other activity. And yet these seemingly uninteresting stories actually reveal a lot about who Jesus is and what he came to do as the true divine shepherd.

Perhaps it is no surprise that with that flurry of activity, healing and demon casting – that Jesus and the disciples needed a break. He tries to lead them away for a moment of rest only to be so sought after by the crowds that they beat Jesus to their vacation destination! Rather than turn them away, ignoring their need, the text says that Jesus had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

This shepherd imagery from Jesus is nothing new in the Bible. In Numbers 27, Moses prayed for a shepherd for the people of Israel who would help lead them as they entered the promised land. The prophet Ezekiel criticized the kings of Israel by saying they weren't caring for the people because as shepherds they were feeding themselves rather than their sheep. Of course there is opening line from the well-known Psalm 23, which is appointed for today, "The Lord is my shepherd..." and Jesus himself is called the Good Shepherd in John 10.

However, in this story, the shepherd imagery, or lack thereof, is used as the reason for Jesus' compassion. This implies as much about who Jesus is as it was a critique against the supposed "shepherds" of the people in the land where they were living. Shepherds who would cut off the head of anyone who threatened their power and place in society. With this story coming right after the beheading of John the Baptist, Jesus knows that the earthly leaders who were supposed to lead and guide God's people, have instead let that authority serve their own agenda and needs.

In these two stories of Jesus' encounter with the crowds, which have been sandwiched together in the lectionary, we see how Jesus has been sent by God to be that true divine shepherd – leading God's people back into the fold. Jesus became one of us here on earth so that he could shepherd God's people from all of the places that they had been scattered and lost in this world. To do this, he provides the crowds with what has been lacking from their worldly leaders. Verse

34 says that after Jesus had compassion on them – he didn't start with eye-catching healings or spectacular miracles – he began by teaching them. Jesus fed God's people with the kind of food that can never spoil or run out – an ability to learn more about God and enter into relationship with God. Yes, the amazing miracles come next, and Jesus will literally feed their hungry bellies when just a few fish and loaves of bread are multiplied for the crowd. But Jesus starts his tending of God's sheep by satisfying their hunger for God's word.

With this kind of leadership, it is no surprise that the crowds were constantly following him and running ahead of him to join him where he would be. What is interesting in this passage is perhaps what is not there. There is no physical description of what Jesus looked like – either in this text or any other passage of scripture. And yet twice we heard that the crowds “recognized” him. How were they able to recognize Jesus? It is not like he had a Facebook or Instagram account letting people know which lakeshore he was going to be at today. And there were no posters hung up on the walls of the marketplace to help people identify him. People recognized Jesus for who he is and what he does. Jesus was certainly known for his words, but more importantly for his actions.

Which leads me to a question - why are we here today? I don't just mean why have we gathered in whatever manner you may be hearing this message today, whether that is at home or in a church building with others – but why have we gathered as God's people each and every week for the last 2,000 years? If we think about the mission of the church – it is more closely aligned to what we heard a few weeks ago when Jesus sent out the apostles 2-by-2 into the world. As nice as our buildings and programs may be, the true mission of the church is not to exist for its own sake – but to be sent out to spread God's message of love, salvation and grace, rather than keeping the message to ourselves. Our calling as God's beloved baptized children is to be known as Jesus was known – not for the ways that we

seek power and prestige for ourselves – but in the ways that we tend and care for God’s people. This means we need to find the same balance that Jesus had – at times meeting the physical needs of our neighbors so that they can be open to hear God’s word and have their spiritual needs met as well.

If we truly followed this calling, every church building would be empty on Sunday morning. So I ask you again, why are we here? To answer this, we have to go back to the beginning of today’s text. After the apostles returned from their mission and shared with Jesus all that they had done – he immediately recognized their need for rest. None of us, not even Jesus, can give ourselves away 100% of the time. That is a sure recipe for burnout and disaster. It is important to find those “deserted places” – which may look a lot like the inside of a church building or a quiet retreat center – or a simple walk in the woods– in order to be fed and nourished for that calling in God’s mission in the world. There has to be a balance between going off into a monastic community that never interacts with the outside world, and spending all of our time and energy feeding others but neglecting to care for ourselves.

Jesus came among us as the true divine shepherd – teaching and leading, healing and feeding – but also modeling the need for rest and renewal, and the importance of being in community with other faithful followers. How will we speak or act in this next week, which might reveal God’s love to someone in our lives? Will our hearts and eyes be opened to see the need of our neighbors or siblings around the world, so that we can love like Jesus loved and provide for what they need – whether that is a physical, emotional or spiritual need? How will we be fed by the Good Shepherd, to help encourage, empower and equip us to make Christ known in word and deed? We give thanks for the true divine shepherd who guides us against the ways of this world. Amen.

Rooted in Christ and sustained by the Spirit, we offer our prayers for the church, the world, and all of creation. Each petition will conclude, “Hear us, O God.” And you may respond, “Your mercy is great.”

Tend your church, O God. Encourage bishops, pastors, and deacons in their proclamation of the gospel. Raise up new leaders and encourage those pursuing a call to ministry. Embolden all the baptized to embody your love and justice. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Restore your creation, O God. Sustain croplands and pastures and safeguard all farm animals and livestock. Preserve lakes, rivers, and streams that offer refreshment. Revive lands recovering from natural disasters and protect coastlands threatened by rising oceans. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Reconcile the nations, O God. Break down the dividing walls that make us strangers to one another and unite us as one human family. Equip leaders to deal wisely with conflict and guide diplomats who seek peaceful solutions. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Heal your people, O God. Look with compassion on immigrants, exiles, and all who are afraid or feel lost. Give rest to those who are weary, comfort to those who are grieving, and recovery to those who are ill (*especially*). Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Nourish your people, O God. Prepare a table where we receive food for our hungering spirits. Renew our commitment to provide for one another and revitalize our ministries of feeding and nurturing hungry neighbors. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

You lead us home, O God. We give thanks for all who have died, now citizens with the saints. As you have received them into your heavenly home, so welcome all of us to dwell in your house forever. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

We lift these and all our prayers to you, O God, confident in the promise of your saving love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The blessing of God,  
who provides for us, feeds us, and journeys with us,  
✠ be upon you now and forever. **Amen.**