

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 11
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
July 18, 2021
Jeremiah 23:1-6
Psalm 23
Ephesians 2:11-22
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Have Mercy

Jesus is trying to take the disciples on retreat. Away. By themselves in an uncrowded place. To rest a while.

They get in the boat once again to cross that big lake we know as the Sea of Galilee. This is another of the four crossings of this lake in Mark's gospel. Somehow people see that they are going across, and they run along the shore and get there before Jesus and his posse do. How is this possible? How can they run faster along the shore than the boat can sail to get to the intended spot on the other side?

I don't know. When the boat arrives, however, the retreat is postponed. Because a great crowd of people once again is waiting to engulf Jesus. Mark says he had compassion on them. He was stirred by their plight. They seemed to him as sheep without a shepherd.

He began to teach them many things.

He had compassion on them, for them. Lovingkindness toward them welled up in him, and he behaved generously toward them.

When we are cooking along checking off items on our to-do lists, can we experience something unexpected as a holy interruption? Can we modify our plans and show mercy to others—without resentment?

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This is another one of those Sundays where we skip a bunch of verses in the appointed gospel passage. Today we have just the bun of a double-decker Markan sandwich, and both layers of the middle are left out. That arrival on the lakeshore and being engulfed by another crowd is one side of the bun.

What happens next starting in verse 35 of Mark chapter 6 is that the disciples say, “Um, Jesus, it’s late now. And these people have been out here all day, and we’re in the middle of nowhere and there’s nothing to eat. Why don’t you call it a day and send them on their way so they can get some food on their way home.”

The laconic reply: “You give them something to eat.”

“Um, do you want us to go someplace and spend 200 days’ wages to get enough bread to feed them all?”

“Go see what you have. Take stock. How many loaves are there?”

“Five loaves—and two fish.”

“That’ll work,” says Jesus. “Have them sit down in groups on this lovely grass.”

They sit down in fifties and hundreds. So orderly. So surprising given that everyone must be tired and hungry and thirsty and cranky.

Jesus takes what there is. And in this classic feeding miracle, we see the fourfold action so familiar to us: he takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it.

And there is enough. For everyone.

Twelve baskets full of pieces of bread and fish are left over. Five thousand men plus women and children have dined.

Here’s the second piece of the middle of the sandwich that’s left out today:

Jesus tells the disciples to get back in the boat, the same one that early that day they had come across on with him only to be swallowed up once more by a crowd.

He sends them in the boat back to the other side of the lake without him. Another of the four crossings of the Sea of Galilee in Mark’s gospel.

And then what? Then there is a retreat after all, but it’s a solo retreat rather than a group one. Jesus, having dispersed the crowd and his closest friends and followers, goes alone up a mountain to pray. His classic pattern: work and rest, extend and withdraw. To recharge, re-center, get refreshed and re-grounded.

Can you and I value our own health and wellbeing as well as that of others and do the things we need to do to take care of ourselves?

And up in the evening Jesus comes down from the mountain and stands on the shore. He sees the disciples straining at the oars against an adverse wind. And what does he do? He moves toward them, walking on the water. And Mark says he intends to pass by them.

But the disciples see him and think he is a ghost. After all, it's not every day that somebody crosses a lake on foot. They all see Jesus but don't recognize him, and they cry out in fear.

And he says, "Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid."

The disciples are astounded. They did not understand what was up with almost no bread becoming so much more than enough. And they sure don't understand somebody walking on water.

They get to the other side of the lake. Yet again people recognize Jesus. Everyone turns up from everywhere. They bring all who are sick on their mats. No matter where Jesus is, village, city, farm, marketplace, people lay the sick in his path. And those who are sick beg Jesus that they might touch just the fringe of his cloak. And everyone who touches his cloak is healed, just like that woman with the hemorrhage we heard about three weeks ago today.

So many sick people. More every day. Just like COVID raging in Cuba and many other places. No end to the sickness. No end to the dying.

If Jesus had not taken time away to re-center himself in relationship with the Holy One, how in the world would he have had the fortitude to face the suffering people were literally putting in front of him all the time?

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Most likely, these two stories in the middle of our Markan sandwich today were skipped in our lectionary portion because we will have the same two stories from John's gospel next week as we come to the first of five Sundays in John.

But, having reminded you of the pieces that were left out, I want to draw your attention to a few things:

First, when we get started in this passage, Jesus' intention is to go on retreat with the disciples. Just with them. When they encounter yet another crowd, his response is not that they are throwing a wrench in his plans and getting him off schedule. No, he isn't annoyed by them. He sees them. And he cares about what they are experiencing. He meets them where they are. He has compassion for them.

Second, although he allows his intended schedule basically to be delayed by a day, he modifies and carries on. He still takes time away to rest. He does not just say, "Well, back in the boat, y'all. We'll try again another time." No, he sends everyone away and takes time away to take care of his own spiritual and emotional and personal needs. He remembers to rest.

Third, when he starts across the lake and the disciples think he is a ghost and are frightened, he also comforts and reassures them. They're his team. His peeps. They rely on one another. He doesn't scold them. He consoles them.

Fourth, when he Jesus encounters yet another crowd of sick and suffering people on yet another spot on the shore of that lake, he again meets them with compassion.

We could sum these four items up this way:

Have mercy on all those in the world around you.

Have mercy on yourself.

Have mercy on your nearest and dearest.

Have mercy on those who are suffering the most.

Have mercy.

Love mercy. Do justice. Walk humbly with God. *Jesus, Lamb of God, have mercy on us.*