

Lectionary 16

July 22, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56)

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

(Mark 6: 53-56)

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into the 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.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today in the Gospel, we encounter a strange little text. You may have noticed that we read Mark, Chapter 6, verses 30 through 34, and 53 to 56. We read five verses, skip seventeen verses, and read four more. This is interesting. Especially when you realize that that thing in the middle that we skip included two of Jesus' most amazing miracles: Jesus feeds five thousand people with five loaves and two fish, and then walks on water across the lake.

We leave that part out today. It's like you're getting the sandwich with no filling. It's like you're driving to the movies and you're driving home, but you don't stay and watch the movie in between. Why are all the mainline churches reading this hacked up version of Mark today? Why were we assigned this — then that?

Honestly, I was ready to find something else to talk about today. And then I remembered Oreo cookies. Does anybody here like Oreo cookies? All right. We have some Oreo fans. Does anybody here twist the Oreo cookies open and eat the inside first? I'm getting this look like, "Well, yeah."

I think Nabisco counts on that, because they keep changing the inside of Oreo cookies. Worldwide, there have been seventy different middles, including Cherry Cola, Kettle Corn, Pina Colada, Spicy Hot Cinnamon, Green Tea, Waffles and Syrup, Peeps Marshmallow, Swedish Fish, coconut, and plain vanilla. The middle is the part people get excited about — except me. I like the chocolate part. I have been known to twist it open and scrape off the inside and then just eat the chocolate, because, well, chocolate.

So maybe the outer wrapping isn't all that bad. Maybe the less-exciting outer wrapping of the two great miracles has something to say to us. Maybe these summaries of daily pressing through the crowds have as much to say as the big, flashy miracle. Let's take a look.

Today, the disciples come back from their preaching tour. Jesus sent them out a while back—we talked about it two weeks ago—and they went to all of the neighboring villages to preach and to heal. So, today, we have the disciples coming back high on a successful mission. “We did it!” “It worked!” “Let me tell you about everything that happened!” In the Gospel of Luke, they come back and say, “*Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!*” You know what it feels like when everything comes together and it works? They were energized.

In the meantime, Jesus has just gotten word that his cousin, John, known as the Baptizer, was murdered at Herod's hands. So Jesus, instead of being energized, is in this deep grief. John was his relative. But more than that, John was his mentor. Jesus didn't start preaching until John was arrested. He had listened to John. He was baptized by John. John preached the message; Jesus fulfilled the message. And now John was dead, all because of a young girl's dance and her mother's grudge. Senseless death. A death that foreshadowed Jesus' own. Grief, and anger, and questions. The disciples are pumped up. Jesus is broken down.

“*Come away,*” says Jesus, “*to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.*” They all need time to renew. They all are in danger of losing themselves to success or to hopelessness. They are in danger of forgetting who they are. “*Come away,*” says Jesus, “*and rest a while.*”

Now, I want to be clear. This is not rest awhile as in “lay in the hammock for the afternoon”, or “take a power nap.” Those are rests. But you don't do those things in the desert. You don't sail away to a deserted place to sleep. The desert is wilderness. It's the place of wildness and uncertainty. There are not five-star restaurants and fine hotels there. It is harsh and lonely. And for all of scripture, it is the place to go for clarity.

Jesus goes to the desert after his baptism to discern what his calling is. He goes to a deserted place before he expands his ministry out of Capernaum. It's a place to go to know who you are. Now, Jesus takes his disciples to that deserted place to remember who they are and what they are about.

You know how sometimes, when things are going great, we are tempted to think, “It’s all on me. My issues are the center of the universe. My skills, and my opinions, my sheer force of will, are going to make all things better.”

We see every success as a stepping-stone to power and influence. We stress about how much we can accomplish and what will happen if we don’t do it. The desert calls us back to what is really real; who really holds the future; who gives us life and skill and time; what it is that God will do through us. Being away gives perspective.

And then there are those times when we are wracked with loss, or grief, or failure, or doubt. We wonder what it’s all for. We feel like God has deserted us or maybe just doesn’t care. We feel like everything is our fault. Or we just can’t get it right. And who cares, anyway?

We need to go away and remember how deeply we are loved. How much we are connected to each other. How God will never see us as any less than a beloved child of God, and is always showing us the way to fullness of life. “*Come away,*” says Jesus, “*to a deserted place by yourself, and rest a while.*” Renew, rediscover.

So they go. And when they get to the deserted place, they discovered it is not deserted. The crowd beat them there. This is not what they had planned. Now what? I always think the first reaction is to go somewhere else. You know how, when you get to the movie theater and the line is really long, or you get to the restaurant and there is a two-hour wait, you say, “Okay. We’ll just go somewhere else.”

But Jesus has another idea. If the point of the trip is to remember what they are all about, here it is in front of them. In the midst of this crowd of ordinary, unremarkable people, Jesus looks at them and has compassion.

God notices. God responds. God lavishes love and hope on this nameless crowd – these ordinary people. God loves them just where they are. And that is the core of the gospel.

We tend to focus on the big events. To think about and analyze and argue about the big miracles: walking on water, stilling a storm, raising Jairus’ daughter, healing the blind man. And we forget how many times Jesus plunges into a crowd to give healing and life, with wild abandon.

Here at the deserted place, Jesus reminds the disciples, and reminds us, that God is a God of undeserved, unyielding compassion, and wild, unhindered abundance – every single day.

For those blinded by success and those broken by circumstance, comes the reminder that all is gift, and God is the consummate giver.

Diana Butler Bass put it this way:

“Yes, the New Testament records some specific, targeted miracles. But far more often, Jesus speaks of a wildly, un-targeted God—one who lavishes drunken wedding guests with more and finer wine, who throws seed out with wild abandon, who issues invitations to the unnamed poor to dine, who throws a party for a profligate son, and who multiplies fish and bread so that thousands might eat, not once but twice.

“On a massive crowd relentlessly pursuing him, he showers blessings: “Blessed are the poor! Blessed are those who hunger!” Standing up on an ancient hill, Jesus yells out: ‘Presents for everyone!’ These gifts are not targeted. They simply are. They are not obligations to be repaid; rather, they are gifts to be enjoyed.”¹

If we can see God as a God of undeserved, unyielding compassion, and wild, unhindered abundance, it changes the way we see the world. We can live in awe at everything that is provided to us. We can live in glad sharing because there is enough, and more. We can notice the hidden and forgotten, because compassion is not a limited commodity to be greedily held onto. We can find joy in being part of a growing, glorious world full of wonder and the wide-open love of God.

Whether the disciples learn it in a deserted place or in the midst of a crowd, compassion and abundance are the true story of our lives, by which we interpret all other stories.

These two little Oreo moments we read today hold together all of Jesus’ miracles and teachings. And more than that, they hold together all of our experiences. We are people of compassion and abundance. In little ways and large, in life-changing ways and “look hard or you’ll miss it” ways, we are surrounded by compassion and abundance. We receive from a lavish God and we give it to a waiting world.

May this be the true story of your life today and in the weeks to come.

Amen.

¹ Bass, Diana Butler. *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* (pp. 26-27). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.