

**Year B, Pentecost 8, Proper 11**  
**July 22, 2018**  
**By Thomas L. Truby**  
**Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**

### **No Time to Eat!**

The apostles (meaning the original twelve who have been sent out) have returned from the surrounding towns where Jesus had sent them two by two. They are excited by what they have been able to do. They have healed people, cast out unclean spirits and taught them things. They tell Jesus all about it. There is a frenzied, harried quality to the scene. The text says 'Many people were coming and going so there was no time to eat.'

The disciples appear distracted and over-stimulated. They are not calm and centered. They can cure people and people flock to them. They are like rock stars who find themselves at the center of people's adulation. Diversions are everywhere and they are speeded-up to the point of not stopping to eat. Out of balance and ignoring their basic human needs, they are playing with emotional fire.

Jesus, seeing their condition says, "'Come by yourselves to a secluded place and rest for a while.'" He has to get them away from the milling crowds or they will lose connection with their God-given inner reality. Their souls are in danger. They will lose their sense of grounding and get carried away by the crowds of demanding people, coming and going. Large crowds of people, even admirers, powerfully affect us and not necessarily in good ways. It is almost impossible to resist them. We get entranced and find ourselves thinking and behaving in ways we would not think or behave on our own. Jesus knows he must get them away to a secluded spot for their soul's sake.

A few years ago, James Alison, a very well-known theologian was staying in our home. I wanted to write a bio about him so that people would know who he is. I wrote it and then asked him to read it to make sure I had the facts straight. He refused. He said it wouldn't be good for him and might get him off track. I was surprised but after some thought I think I understand.. He was afraid he would unconsciously begin shaping his words to please me or listen too closely to what I said about him and lose touch with what the Spirit within him had to say. He was aware that the people around us have a profound effect upon us; they are a force field of energy, a gravitational pull that can easily pull us off course and out of relationship with God who comes to us in weakness and isolation, in the wilderness and on the cross. We can only take places full of hubbub for so long before we lose connection with ourselves.

The crowd could easily turn disciples into their leaders serving their fickle desires. Fickle desires often pit one group against another, the opposite of what Paul was talking about in the passage from Ephesians. Here Paul, speaking of Christ Jesus and the division between the Jews and the Gentiles says, “For he (Jesus) is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” It is a beautiful passage full of hope and promise.

Jesus pulls his disciples out of the crowd and gathers them into a boat and then gets in himself. He leads them across the lake toward a deserted place. But their attempt at crowd evasion fails. “Many people saw them leaving and recognized them, so they ran ahead from all the cities and arrived before them.” When they arrive at their secluded destination the crowds are there to greet them.

I thought they were going to get a vacation! I thought the point of this was that we need to get away, have holiday time, and invest in the renewal of our souls. I thought the lectionary people put this text in the middle of July to justify the pastor’s vacation in August. This didn’t turn out like I expected.

Maybe Mark has something else in mind and knows something we don’t. Maybe he knows Jesus has to get the disciples away from the crowd and together around him or they will succumb to the desires of the crowd. Maybe the center of Jesus’ intention was not getting them to a deserted place, like we have thought, but getting them away from the crowd and reassembled with Jesus as their center.

I can’t find words strong enough to express the importance of this. Getting the disciples into the boat with Jesus and getting them out to sea away from the crowd mattered way more than their destination. He has to break the gravitational pull of the adoring, demanding and ultimately dangerous crowd or he will lose the disciples.

This is all extremely important and mirrors the choice we face today and have faced throughout history. Will we follow Jesus or will we go with the culture? It seems clear to me that the culture is the crowd and at the deepest level has no shepherd. We will either follow the “shepherd-less” crowd or we will follow Jesus. I will say more about that in a minute. It is very rare in history that we can do both. Jesus-followers almost always find themselves on the side of those their culture ignores or despises because culture is almost always built on exclusion and violence when you look at it deeply and with eyes that see.

The church throughout history has not done well in making this choice for Jesus and our young people and thinkers use that as a reason to reject the church rather than reform it from within. They point to the Crusades, the pogroms, the way Christians treated native peoples during colonialism and beyond and the ways Christians built their societies on the slavery of others

and continue to do so in disguised and culturally embedded ways. If we want to follow Jesus we must get away from the crowd.

How do we do this? Through prayer, devotional reading, art, hikes in the woods, gardening, working on old cars or whatever works for us. It would be interesting to hear where each of us finds our peace. For me, I reconnect with the strength that comes from outside me (which for me is Jesus) by reading, praying, and sometimes writing. I need this alone time on a regular basis and often. Without it I get off and often irritable.

Back to the text where the story as taken a shift: “When Jesus arrived and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” Jesus could be open to the crowd because he had already accomplished his purpose in getting the disciples away, centered on him and back in touch with reality. That happened in the boat while they were crossing the lake. Ironically, Jesus had already been a shepherd to his disciples by leading them away from the crowd. The crowd is often a poison to Jesus-followers because crowds are infused with systemic evil and cause us to act in ways contrary to the way of Jesus.

As for this leaderless crowd, they are wandering, searching, defenseless, vulnerable, dangerous and lacking in perspective. How does Jesus respond? “Then he began to teach them many things.” Jesus is teaching again. He has a body of knowledge he wants to share with them.

Do we have any idea what he taught them? St. Mark’s strange insert, seemingly out of place, on the story of John’s beheading, told just before this story, gives us a clue because it parallels the crucifixion. From this we know he taught them about the human species, what we do when love and forgiveness is not at our center. And he taught them about his father, their Abba; their God who is different than they; more forgiving than they can imagine and possessing way more love than they expect, imagine or feel they deserve. If they will listen, these wandering sheep will find their shepherd and the connecting link will be their awareness that their shepherd loves them in a way more profound than their minds can fathom. Thanks be to God. Amen.