

GOSPEL READING FOR JULY 19, 2015

START WITH SCRIPTURE: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

OBSERVE:

In this passage under consideration, the lectionary editors have made some curious decisions. They have the reader leap from Mark 6:34 to verse 53 — hopscotching completely over two very impressive miracles.

In verses 35-44, Jesus feeds five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish; and in verses 45-52, after Jesus has sent the disciples on across the Sea of Galilee so that he can pray in solitude, Mark describes the incident in which Jesus walks on water to their boat in the midst of a storm!

So, I ask, why skip these two HUGE miracles? I can only assume that the editors choose to compensate for it by focusing, as they do in the lectionary readings ahead, on these two miracles as depicted and developed theologically in the Gospel of John, Chapter six.

Here, the focus is on the relational dynamics between Jesus, the disciples, and the crowds of people who are beginning to follow him.

First, the disciples have returned from their first “missionary” expeditions, and they are beside themselves with excitement! *The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught.* Jesus draws them apart from the crowds so that they may rest and eat after their adventures. They leave by boat and sail across the lake.

But the crowds anticipate their movements, perhaps watching the course of the boat, and arrive at this solitary place on foot even before Jesus and his disciples. Jesus isn’t annoyed or impatient, but recognizes their desperate needs: *When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.*

Then, after the interlude with the feeding of the multitude, Jesus sends the disciples back across the lake — alone, until he joins them on the water. So we pick up with verse 53, when they arrive at Gennesarat. And the cycle continues — word spreads that the miracle worker has come, and people bring their sick to be healed. Jesus has become a rock star in this region, followed by the masses!

APPLY:

Ministry can be extremely exhilarating. But it can also be exhausting. Jesus recognizes the need of even the most dedicated disciples to be physically and spiritually replenished. He takes the disciples aside to a quiet, solitary retreat so they may eat and rest.

This passage reveals how difficult it may be to find these times of “Sabbath rest” for those who are deeply committed to ministry. He certainly is committed: *he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.* He allows his schedule to be suspended because of the great need.

What the lectionary passage doesn’t reveal is that Jesus still finds time to get away. The reason he sends the disciples on across the lake is that he himself must find solitude to pray: *Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray (Mark 6:45-46).*

There must be cycles in ministry: times to work hard and diligently, but also times of solitude for prayer and rest. Only then do we have the spiritual resources to minister effectively.

RESPOND:

I admire Jesus' availability to the crowds who were *like sheep without a shepherd*. Unlike me, he never loses his patience or whines that he needs some time off!

On the other hand, he is differentiated enough to realize that he must find time for solitude and prayer if he is to accomplish the great tasks ahead.

I believe that this is a good pattern for anyone who attempts to offer ministry in Jesus' name. Work hard, pray earnestly, and also rest, so that we may be equipped for every good work.

Lord, your example of compassion and rest are both important to me. Help me to see people the way you see them, with compassion for sheep who need a shepherd — namely, you the Good Shepherd. But help me also to find the time to rest and reflect and be restored so that I can minister according to your will, not my own impulses. Amen.

BY TOM LETCHWORTH

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