

“Boundless Grace”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

“For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat” (6:31).

One commentator writes: *Is this not a succinct description of the lives of many people today? Too busy to pause for a real lunch, young professionals munch on vending-machine fare while working at their desks. Teens grab a bagel for breakfast on the way out the door to school. Parents and children drive through a succession of fast-food restaurants between after-school lessons and sports practices. Commuters sip double lattes on the early morning drive, gnaw on baby carrots between meetings, and pick up takeout on the way home. Toddlers graze on cereal pieces and other portable finger foods so that meal schedules need not control the timing of family shopping trips. We are a people besieged by activities and responsibilities that reshape even basic functions of life such as eating. Our busyness prevents us from gathering for family meals, and we may even forget that we enjoy stopping to eat together, especially when we find pleasure and fulfillment in many of the other activities that make up our day.*

But what happens if Christians become too busy to come away and break bread together? This text suggests that gathering as a faith community to rest from our labors and partake of a common meal is an important part of life together. Jesus offers a cautionary word to his disciples and the contemporary church. We need times when we return from our individual activities – even those activities done in the name and for the sake of Jesus – and re-form ourselves as the body of Christ. Otherwise, we may be broken and poured out so often that we struggle to be useful as Christ’s hands and feet in the world. We may become so caught up in the busyness of ministry that we forget to spend time with the One who would direct our preaching, teaching, healing, and justice-seeking endeavors (Karen Marie Yust, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 260-262).

Think for a moment about all that has happened prior to this passage in Mark. After his baptism and temptation in the wilderness, Jesus calls his first disciples – Simon, Andrew, James and John. He continues to go through the cities, towns, and countryside, preaching, healing, teaching, and curing people of their illnesses. Jesus stills a storm on the sea, with the disciples in the boat, and they are left wondering, “Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?” (4:41) Then, he calls the twelve disciples together, sending them out, two by two, and

they proclaim that all should repent. “They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them” (6:13).

Earlier, the disciples had been active observers to the ministry of Jesus Christ – witnessing first-hand the power of God incarnate. Then, they had been commissioned themselves to act with the authority of Jesus, and they had witnessed first-hand the Spirit’s guidance and leading in ministry. Now, they were exhausted and excited, all at once, for the work God had done through them. They didn’t know what they needed, but Jesus did. “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” (6:31).

Let me ask you something: what’s the best vacation you’ve ever had? A Caribbean cruise? Snow-skiing in Colorado? Two weeks in Hawaii? A weekend away at a secluded lake? Hiking the Appalachian Trail? Sight-seeing in Europe? Time spent with family or friends with no work responsibilities at all? A great vacation can be measured by the places we visit. But most of the time, a great vacation is measured by the people we are with, and the fact that we are released from our work responsibilities for a period of time.

Our family had a great vacation three weeks ago at Ocean City, New Jersey. That was because of the time spent with our family, in a location that we truly enjoy, and that for a week, at least, all of us could lay down our work, school, and life responsibilities and renew ourselves. I’m sure all of us can relate to that feeling when we have had time away for rest and renewal.

Now, if we had driven up to our rental house in Ocean City, and instead of an empty house, we were met by all of you there waiting for us – please don’t take this the wrong way – but I would not have been pleased! The whole point of going on vacation is to retreat from our work for a brief period. If all of you had been there waiting for me, there would have been no respite or renewal.

Jesus invites the disciples away to rest and renew, right? But what happens? “Many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them” (6:33). All the people showed up for the disciples’ vacation! The disciples and Jesus walked away from the towns and villages, and the people followed them. They got into a boat and went away from the shore, and the people followed them. They landed on the opposite side of the lake, and the people were waiting there for them. Barbara Brown Taylor comments, “It is not hard to imagine several realistic responses to such a situation. Jesus could turn his back and stay in the boat to catch up with his disciples’ news, or could even sail on for that matter. He could scold the crowd for following him and ask them to disperse, telling them he has no more to offer them this day. Or he could throw an uncharacteristic temper tantrum, reminding them that he is just one single person who is

as much in need of a little rest as the next guy and (is) fed up with their demands.

“But Jesus chooses none of these. With every reason in the world to choose anger, resentment, or despair, he chooses compassion. He looks at the crowd and through some holy optical illusion sees not a crowd but a collection of people – a woman with a frail baby in her arms, a gaunt man with a withered hand, a boy with a face full of questions about the meaning of his life. He sees all of these people, like sheep without a shepherd, and he lays aside his own need in favor of theirs. He may not have much to offer them just now, but what he has he gives, teaching them all afternoon” (“Local Miracles,” *Mixed Blessings*, 98-99).

“Compassion fatigue.” That’s a phrase I’ll throw around when I’m absolutely spent, when I’ve been through the wringer, and I realize that my emotional reserves are completely empty. Sound familiar? Know what that feels like?

Jesus could have easily claimed “compassion fatigue” when the crowds met him and the disciples on the other side of the lake. I’m pretty sure a few of the disciples were already thinking “compassion fatigue” when they were met by the crowds of people. But instead of fatigue, Jesus welcomes them with compassion: “and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (6:34). And that compassion continued when they got to Gennesaret, for they were besieged by people bringing the sick on mats, laying the sick before them in the marketplaces, yearning for just a touch of Jesus’ cloak, with the hope that their loved ones would be healed. And Jesus’ compassion continues, for all who touched his cloak were healed (6:56).

We do get fatigued, there is no doubt about that. But Jesus never loses compassion – for the sick, for the world, for us. When we turn ourselves over to him as his disciples, then we are given strength even when we think we have nothing left to give. And as empty vessels filled with his love and compassion, we become a healing presence for a broken world. If the church today is unrecognizable as a place of healing, then we need to reflect on what our mission and purpose in the world are and how we communicate the good news of God’s healing grace in this time and place.

And the compassion which Jesus offers comes as he and the disciples travel, as they move from place to place, and perhaps he provides a model to us for how we are called to serve – not just in one location but out and among the people.

Karen Marie Yust writes: *Both segments of this text suggest that the church belongs in the world rather than cloistered in church buildings set apart from the hustle and bustle of daily living. Jesus and the disciples encounter people in need as part of their movement from place to place, not by establishing a central location and waiting for people to make their way to them.*

Healing takes place when the faith community and those with whom they minister reach out to one another in mutual need. Just as persons come to the church in need of God's grace, the faith community engages in ministry because it needs to live as Christ has commanded, as the body of Christ sent into the world to help God repair the brokenness caused by sin. By embracing its role as the fringe of Christ's cloak, the church can expect to have a healing effect on all who reach out to Christian communities with the desire to be made whole (ibid).

We go out into the world when we try new things like worshipping at Meadowood Park next week, or inviting our community to our front yard at the Community Picnic next month. We go out into the world when our youth and adults go to places like Kentucky, Wisconsin, and the Dominican Republic to serve in mission. We go out into the world when we invite neighbors and strangers to church, and show the love of Christ to others with no expectation of anything in return. We are the hem of Christ's cloak when we welcome the stranger, show compassion to the weak, and extend forgiveness to those who have wronged us. We model God's boundless grace when we allow Christ to fully live and rule our hearts and minds as his disciples.

We will experience compassion fatigue – that will not go away. But perhaps, the next time we are feeling that fatigue, we might remember that it is not up to us to do it all by ourselves. Jesus offers all the strength and comfort and compassion which is needed for the friend, the stranger, the family member in our midst. We simply are the conduit, the vessel, which shares his boundless grace with our world. For it is a boundless grace which was first shared with us, when we were at our lowest, and our Savior had compassion on us. We're not called to save the world on our own; we're called to care for the world as God has first loved us through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.