

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Christ healing the multitudes

6:30 The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught.

6:31 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.

6:32 And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

6:33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.

6:34 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.

6:53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat.

6:54 When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him

6:55 and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.

6:56 And wherever he went, into 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.

Two weeks ago, Mark's author painted a picture for us: Twelve disciples, Jesus-followers, each equipped with a makeshift walking stick, and a threadbare tunic, and hand-me-down sandals, glimpsing God's messy but wonderful kin-dom. Sure, you are bound to get a little sand on your feet when you walk along the shoreline, but with a little grit and determination, you simply shake the dust off your feet.

And it's amazing. These disciples had no alms to share, no pre-prepared meal kits to distribute, no medicine droppers to dispense antibiotics, no tools to till the land, nor patch leaky rooves, no sanctuary in a box, no praise team for hire. Just six pairs of partners, collaborators in God's movement, seeking to be earnestly, authentically present to the people whom they encountered.

The pairs proclaimed repentance – turning toward a Creator that's never turned away, whose love has never waned. The duos cast out demons, all the dismissals and I-told-you-sos and wouldn'ts and couldn'ts and mustn'ts and shouldn'ts of systems that rob human dignity. Two by two they anointed the sick with oil. They offered healing.

HOW intently they must have listened to their neighbors! HOW compassionate their gaze must have been! HOW timely their touch! Led by the Spirit, moved by the Spirit, elevated and empowered by the Spirit, they shared gifts of a spiritual nature.

As if to give our neophytes a moment to process these new powers, or perhaps, as a measured warning for the danger and messiness of their new path, Mark's author offered an aside last week. The senseless death of John the Baptist. The despicable nature of Herod. The worst

impulses of empire. Empathy and compassion juxtaposed against apathy and disdain.

Fast forward to this week, and the missional pairs have finished their first set of adventures and have reunited with Jesus and one another. And it's a lovely scene to imagine. Here are a dozen people pondering the power of experience, reckoning with calling, feeling the natural high of purpose-filled moments, and keenly aware of their own autonomy, and the untapped potential of their generosity and curiosity. It makes me think of new parents of week-old babies, or new schoolteachers after the first week of school, or healthcare workers just off their shift. *Can you believe we did that?!? Wow!!!*

But their joy and excitement are tempered by the somber realities of the world around them. We nurtured one little corner of the world, and yet all the while, Herod keeps on Herod-ing. We brought life into the world, but it's still SO fragile. We shared knowledge, but there's still SO MUCH more to share. We offered healing, but there are still SO many people hurting. There are a thousand tomorrows following one heckuva day.

Jesus senses that his friends are feeling a little overwhelmed, wearied both emotionally and physically. "Let's come away to a deserted place, and rest for a while," he says.

But as much as Jesus and the disciples would like to keep their experiences more private for now, carve out time for retreat, the news has spread. They're cooking with gas. The Spirit is at work. And the crowds flock to them, even in deserted places. As a matter of fact, the crowds even anticipate the deserted places they may seek tomorrow.

The text tells us that Jesus has compassion for the crowds. Sometimes, I think we, as hearers and readers of Mark's gospel, have a tendency or a desire to reprimand the crowds. Can't they just leave Jesus and the disciples alone? Can't they just exhibit a little patience? Read the room, people!!! Stop being space invaders!!!

But Jesus senses the deep hunger within the crowds. Just as the disciples are reckoning with the overwhelming and terrifying knowledge that they can be agents in God's transformation of the world, so too, the crowds are reckoning with the reality that they can be seen, heard, dignified, credentialed in this transformative movement. A shepherdless people have finally found a shepherd. And you'll just have to excuse their excitement.

Jesus has compassion for them. Therefore, Jesus begins to teach the crowds. Jesus shares with them the very same stories, the very same good news that he's been sharing with the disciples. The movement is growing.

Now I've taken you all the way up to Mark 6:34. This morning's lectionary text skips verses 6:35-52 and resumes with 6:53. I'm disappointed in this slicing and dicing, because we miss two impactful and profound moments in Jesus' ministry: the feeding of the multitudes, and Jesus walking on stormy waters and calming the winds.

I assume the lectionary committee chose this omission, because next week, we'll turn our attention to John's gospel, and we'll hear about the bread of life, including John's version of feeding the multitudes. And we're gonna keep reading these bread passages for the next two-hundred-thirty-seven weeks. Okay, actually, it's not that long, but

buckle up. It's gonna be a while. We'll be carb-loading well into September.

What we skip to in the narrative is a feast of another kind. Do you remember Herod's feast last week? Yes, gluttony of food and wine, but power, too. Brutality and cruelty simply for the sake of meanness and spite. Juxtapose this image with crowds gathering around Jesus, bringing their sick, and their poor, and their tired, and their needy for healing. And meeting a source who offers love, presence and healing in abundance. It's a gluttony of generosity. A seizing of God's world, right now!!! A faucet, pouring out goodness, saturating longing. How's that for mind-blowing?

This is my hypothesis, though I don't claim the need for it to be so formulaic. Somehow, someway, God creates and centers us, gives each of us purpose. In the presence of Jesus, and indeed in the presence of all those persons who model the love of God, we are made more keenly aware of God's presence, and of God's enduring love for us. Aware and receptive to God's presence and God's love, and gathered in community, we become filled, empowered, and emboldened by God's Spirit. This is a feast of belonging. A feast of restoration. A feast of healing. A realization of redemption, not recovery from the worst parts of ourselves, but rather a reclaiming and reprioritization of our best selves.

We are invited to a feast.

What disappoints me about the omission of the previous two miracles from our text is their utter importance in creating the feast of healing we describe.

Spirit Led. Spirit Fed.
Bob Stillerman
Ninth Sunday After Pentecost; 7/21/2024
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Jesus feeds the multitudes. Yes, bread for their bellies, but bread for their hearts and souls, too. Jesus models a system that values compassion and empathy.

Jesus stills rough waters and calms the winds. It shouldn't be lost on us that something much greater, much more mysterious, much more profound than empires can transcend physical limitations. But there's also a presence that stills the daily storms in our own lives, reminds us that we are not alone, reminds us that grief, or pain, or brokenness, or blah, or isolation are not the final word. God doesn't offer an artificial or imposed sense of security. Let Rome do that. God shepherds us through the valleys of our discontent, leads us to still waters and green pastures.

Somehow, someday, Jesus creates a sense of peace, wholeness, and belonging in communities that incubates, ripens, and ultimately cultivates God's Spirit in God's people. When people are seen and heard, when people are fed physically, spiritually, and emotionally, when they feel safe, when their gifts are encouraged and elevated, the Spirit takes root. And healing begins.

Be it John or Jesus, we've talked a lot these past few weeks about people flocking to the wilderness to find something new, something more compelling. I wonder if wildness is a more apt description? Have we been thinking about repentance all wrong? In the wilderness, God moved unbounded, cloud by day and fire by night, offering provisions and protection. In Jerusalem, God was shoehorned into a Temple Cult, relegated to the limitations of ritual, reduced to the tiny imaginations of ambitious priests. Maybe repentance is seeking to be scripted by the Spirit rather than laboring to script the status quo.

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Rome says, work harder today for wages that stretch not quite as far as they did yesterday. Thank the emperor for his generosity.

Jerusalem says follow the letter of the law. Let the intercessors handle the complicated stuff. We'll let you know if God's paying attention.

Jesus says, "Enough of all that!" Rome and Jerusalem don't get to set the agenda for God's movement in the world. God's people are entitled to experience God's world. God's people are entitled to be seen, and to be heard, and to be fed, and to be made to feel safe, and to find the healing and wholeness that is rightfully theirs. And God's got plenty of resources, more than enough, actually, to make it so.

And I suppose this is my biggest takeaway from this morning's text. As a nation, we find ourselves captivated by multitudes who gather in Chicago and Milwaukee, serving up the empty calories of partisanship and the same-old, same-old ideas dressed up in different colors. And an unending stream of media projections that insist our fate as nation and world are solely beholden to election cycles. And as the big-C Church, we consume stories of those various denominational bodies gathered together, presupposing that neatly-crafted paragraphs of exclusion, made formal by Roberts Rules of Order, can somehow curtail the whims, and indeed the dogged determination of God's Spirit. Even here in our own congregation, we busy ourselves, worrying with the order of things – the right angles of communion lines, the sacred process, the sugar content in our iced tea – over and above Christ's call to compassionate service.

In pursuing the tameness of Temple and State House rather than the wildness of God, we too often fail to hear the call of the Spirit. We too often fail to set the proper agenda.

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In spite of the world's volatility, our community has a history, and a long one at that, of carving out a space of rest, an experiment in faith where people can be seen, and heard, and fed, made to feel safe, and ultimately healed in the love of God, and freed to pursue the Spirit as their conscious leads them. What that means is that when we do Church well, when we Millbrook well, when we live well, things of great importance are happening in this space. And we've got to listen and respond to call of the Spirit. Because when it's all said and done, this place, this movement, this collective love, is enough to help bend that long arc of the moral universe back toward justice. This is an agenda that never stops mattering, no matter what the news cycles may seek to dictate.

Yes, Herod's gonna Herod. But you know what? Millbrook's gonna Millbrook. This day, and every day, we shall sing the mighty power of our God. *For all that borrows life from thee is ever in thy care; and everywhere that we can be, thou, God, art present there.*

May it always be so! Amen.