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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11)
July 18, 2021

Lectionary Year B: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The obvious theme linking this morning's Scripture texts together is shepherding. Look, in particular, to Jeremiah 23, to the twenty-third Psalm, and to Mark 6; there is at least one reference to a shepherd in each, although I would be hard-pressed to say that shepherding is the centerpiece of our Gospel text from Mark. Thus, I anticipate that it won't be possible for me to tie all of these texts together, because that might take away from a decent analysis of our Gospel text, which has a lot of interesting stuff going on in it.

One thing to note about our reading is the interesting surgery that is done here on Mark, chapter 6. Verses 30 through 34 are actually the set-up for Mark's account of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, which, obviously, is omitted from our Gospel text, along with what follows, which is Jesus' walking on the water. Once we've jumped over all of that, we get to verse 53, which tells of the healing of the sick at Gennesaret. Someday, when I have a chance to consult with the Lectionary Gods, I might find out why this particularly unusual surgery was performed.

By this point in Jesus' ministry, we can see that he is attracting a lot of attention. We're seeing crowds of people approaching him, primarily (but not exclusively) for healing. The pattern that develops is one of going out and retreating; yes, Jesus' ministry is very public, but even the Lord himself has to go away and

take a break once in a while!

As for his public ministry, it appears to be very much a ministry of presence. You might be familiar with the adage attributed to Woody Allen -- "Showing up is eighty percent of life" (or some variant thereof) -- and the point of this adage is pretty obvious: People usually aren't looking for someone to bedazzle or impress them, they're looking for someone to be there. In this regard, Jesus did the "eighty percent"; he didn't necessarily "perform" for the crowds (although it does mention here that he taught), but he most certainly was there. Our text points out that even those who touched "the fringe of his cloak" were healed (6:56c), without any intentional act on Jesus' behalf.

It's safe to say that one of the hardest parts of the pandemic was being stripped of our ability to be present with each other. How could we "show up" when we were prohibited from showing up? Thanks to technology, we could do a number of things "virtually," like having families gather together in a Zoom meeting; my high school graduating class, for example, even had a couple of "virtual reunions," which were part cocktail hour, part catching up, and part reminiscing. Like most things throughout the pandemic, these virtual gatherings had their deficiencies, but they were better than nothing.

Now, as we're returning to many of our pre-pandemic patterns of operating, we may find ourselves confronted with a lot of catching up; speaking personally, I have someone's name or some activity related to the church that pops into my mind several times a day,

which are (among other things) reminders of what the pre-pandemic church looked, behaved, acted, worked, and played like. But let me caution everyone (including myself) against temptations to roll everything back to the good, ol' days, because I know very well the limitations of nostalgia, and how nostalgia for the past can lead to despair in the present. Let us always look forward, therefore, knowing that there is, with God, a new vision, idea, or insight that can carry us into the future.

And if there was any good to come out of the pandemic, perhaps it was that we found out how flexible and adaptable we were to challenges that were immediate and quickly changing. Also, remembering Jesus' own pattern of going out and retreating, some of us may have been blessed with quiet time at home that we haven't experienced in decades. (Note that I said "some of us.") But, whatever the case, we can follow Jesus' example of presence using the tools that are in front of us, and after taking the occasional retreat for rest and renewal.

Remember Jesus' words to the disciples: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while" (6:31a). From the text, we might gather that the "rest" didn't last long, but it was still necessary. Those who are called to constantly give of themselves still need to receive something once in a while, and here, it says that "they had no leisure even to eat" (6:31c). Even in an age when things like paid vacation and retirement were unheard of, rest was still thought of as necessary. Whether two thousand years ago or today, burnt-out people can't offer much of themselves!

But the pattern is there -- to go out after a time of retreating, or to do after a time of rest is a good and natural way for anyone to go through life. Even the simple act of coming to church on Sunday morning, of "keeping the Sabbath holy," offers an opportunity to remain still for a moment and receive wisdom and a blessing from God. And many of you have hobbies and avocations that help you clear your head and be refreshed amid all the noise and concerns of this life. Not surprisingly, doing these things makes you better able to do the sorts of things Jesus called his disciples to do.

In today's Gospel text, I suppose I am most struck by the image of Christ going out into the public places and offering a ministry of healing. Applying that, one can also see this as an image for Christ in the world through the ministry of the Church, and if the Church isn't bringing healing to the world, then what is it doing? And healing is very multi-dimensional here; it affects and reaches all places in our bodies, minds, and souls. It's not just physical; it's emotional, psychological, and spiritual, too. Everywhere we look, we can find a wound to be healed or a breach to be repaired, whether literal or figurative. And sometimes, if we just show up, eighty percent of the work will be done. (We might have to offer a bit more than the fringes of our cloaks, however.)

The challenge to all of us, then, is to identify those wounds to be healed and those breaches to be repaired. Might they involve a person, a relationship, or some kind of object? As Christ came into this world to reconcile sinners to God, we, as his followers, are called to bring about a similar sort of reconciliation, per-

haps between the privileged and the marginalized, the boastful and the modest, the gifted and the challenged...and the list could go on and on. But before any of this becomes too daunting, remember what you receive in this place. As the Body of Christ, you receive the Body of Christ in the Eucharist, and, as you exit the church, you are sent forth to be who you are -- the Body of Christ in the world.

In the Church, and through God's Word, and in the Sacraments, you can receive some very powerful spiritual food that will help you meet the challenges of your Christian calling. There's a reason why you come to this place...it's the same reason why Jesus called the disciples to a deserted place. You're here for the refreshment you need to face the world for another week. No one expects you to be superhuman; in fact, God calls you to admit that you aren't, so that you can receive his precious and refreshing gifts of Word and Sacrament.

From there, you can, like Christ, go into the public places and be his body in the world, healing wounds and repairing breaches in the power of his glorious work of reconciliation.

Amen.