

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
July 22, 2018
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Mark 6:30-34 The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. **31** Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

32 So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. **33** But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them.

34 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.

"Jesus Prioritizes People"

Natural disasters are hard to handle. If you live in Iowa, you know you have to prepare for tornados. If Florida is your home, every year brings the risk of powerful hurricanes. And in our slice of God's creation, we are aware of the ever-present dangers from wildfires. For something like a wildfire, you always have to deal with competing priorities. You want lush vegetation, beautiful plants and green trees near your property, but you also realize experts advise having a buffer zone between your home and any plants that could turn into fuel for a fire. If a fire gets close enough, you have to decide between staying to protect your home and getting to safety with enough wiggle room. And then there are the firefighters. I never envy the decisions that incident commanders have to make. Protect densely populated areas or focus on keeping the fire from spreading in open areas? Attack the blaze aggressively or keep your firefighters out of harm's way? Use all the people, aircraft, and equipment at your disposal or try to keep costs from spiraling out of control?

Now that the 416 fire is under control, we actually have the luxury to look back at what happened. We can ask questions and try to learn valuable lessons for when, not if, the next fire breaks out. What went well? What could have gone better?

We can do a helpful assessment after Jesus gathers his 12 apostles together in Mark chapter 6. They return from their mission trip. Jesus wants to debrief his commissioned messengers. He wants to retreat with them to an isolated place where he can teach and encourage them without interruption. And yet, he doesn't completely, successfully get away. He can't. The crowds spot him and follow him. They want to get close to Jesus. They want to spend time with Jesus. Jesus has competing priorities. But this short episode teaches us one important truth: Jesus Prioritizes People.

We see in Mark chapter 6 that people are drawn to Jesus. Earlier we had seen that the people in his hometown rejected Jesus. Right after that Jesus sent out and commissioned his apostles with his power and authority to preach and heal. Between that commissioning and the return of the disciples, we learn about the brutal execution of another of God's messengers, John the Baptist, when Herod tried to silence godly criticism as a way get rid of

his own guilt. But overall, people keep coming to Jesus. We don't know if their motives were always pure or if they sometimes just wanted to be part of the excitement. We don't know exactly what they were looking for from Jesus. Maybe they didn't even know what they wanted. They just wanted to near Jesus and benefit from being close to him. And Jesus was drawn to people too. He didn't disqualify them just because they may have had competing loyalties or mixed up motivations. He didn't give a spiritual entrance exam before they could get access or throw up a sort of religious velvet rope to limit access to his teaching and power.

And yet Jesus had to weigh the needs of all the people streaming toward him with his desire to spend time in quiet instruction with his apostles. There were important ministry goals to get to with those chosen twelve. He needed to recap and wrap up their mission journeys on which he sent them. We see plenty of examples of competing priorities that turn out poorly for us. Professional. prioritizing profits over the people they serve. Politicians prioritizing popularity over the needs of constituents. People close to you prioritizing their own needs over their concern for their own family members. Jesus is like a parent, making sacrifices for children. Like a mother of a newborn putting the baby's need to eat almost constantly above her desire to get a solid night of sleep. Like a father putting his dreams of a new truck on hold while he makes tuition payments for years. More dramatically, we can think of the example of that team of international diving experts and Thai Navy Seals going in to rescue the Wild Boars soccer team from the submerged cave in Thailand.

Jesus had his plans for time with his apostles. But those plans got put on hold: **“But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them.”** (Mark 6:33) Jesus interrupts everything. Jesus feels deeply for people: **“When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”** (Mark 6:34) Whether they realize it or not, Jesus sees them as lost sheep. Jesus has a heart to be their Shepherd. Jesus prioritizes people.

I can't help picturing a conversation in a household near the Sea of Galilee. Mom rushes in as the children are still waking up, trying to avoid doing their chores. “Jesus has been spotted,” she blurts out. They know his location. He took a shortcut across the lake in a boat with his closest followers. If we leave now, we might be able to meet him at his destination. Whatever he's planning, we can get his attention. Daughter yawns. Jesus is great, she says. But it's not like he's that much better, or worse, than all those other important spiritual guides and rabbis out there. There's really no need to get all excited. Her son is a little more skeptical. Most of the rabbis, at least the recognized authorities in Jerusalem seem to be less than enthusiastic about this guy. His teachings don't match up with the traditional beliefs. He seems to be breaking with conventional beliefs. We're probably safer just sticking with them. Her husband just tries to stay out of the debate. He's not really interested in chasing after the latest spiritual fad his wife seems to be into. He will go along if it will keep her happy. He's just not going to get too excited or put too much importance into what this guy is up to.

When we see how Jesus is drawn so deeply to people, it just makes us realize how poorly people prioritize time with Jesus. We see this today in a variety of symptoms. People today generally have a lot of respect for Jesus. But they don't necessarily have a high opinion of Christianity. It's a lot easier and more convenient to incorporate Jesus into some homemade belief system, a customized spirituality. C.S. Lewis tells why this is such a popular option: "so attractive is that it gives one much of the emotional comfort of believing in God and none of the less pleasant consequences. When you are feeling fit and the sun is shining and you do not want to believe that the whole universe is a mere mechanical dance of atoms, it is nice to be able to think of this great mysterious Force rolling on through the centuries and carrying you on its crest. If, on the other hand, you want to do something rather shabby, the Life-Force, being only a blind force, with no morals and no mind, will never interfere with you like that troublesome God we learned about when we were children. The Life-Force is a sort of tame God. You can switch it on when you want, but it will not bother you. All the thrills of religion and none of the cost. Is the Life-Force the greatest achievement of wishful thinking the world has yet seen?" ¹

And it's not just true for people who meditate with nothing more than an empty mind and full cup of coffee. It's not just a danger for people who worship on a mountain peak or find inspiration mainly in a mountain stream. People of faith make faith about so many minor issues. We focus on all the things that get us upset, everything that we can't get out of our minds, all the wins and losses for God that keep us up at night that have so little to do with Jesus. Jesus sees in us what we fail to realize about ourselves. We are lost. Jesus recognizes the danger we are too proud or foolishly self-secure to identify. We are at risk. Finding security in our own system of belief with Jesus as an add-on only leads to false security. You can find lots of religions that work for you, that give you a purpose and help you to behave better, but they don't give you the Shepherd for your soul, for your ultimate and eternal good.

Jesus is the true Shepherd. Jesus has concern for his apostles, not just sending them out on their own to fend for themselves. Jesus has compassion on the crowd. And here's the surprising thing about Jesus. When he saw the crowds and understood their deepest heart needs, here's what happened: **"So he began teaching them many things."** (Mark 6:34) Jesus has a heart to teach the things they need

With all the competing priorities, Jesus did not have a divided heart. Jesus deeply understood his mission. Jesus didn't see people as an interruption. Jesus saw every individual soul as an opportunity to carry out his mission. Jesus saw need to connect his salvation on a personal level. It's important to remember this all came from Jesus' heart of compassion. It's not just pity that looks at pathetic needs and feels badly for hapless victims. Compassion is much deeper. Actually, the word literally means being deeply moved in your bowels. In the Hebrew way of thinking, that's where emotions really hit a person, deep down in your gut. Jesus had a gut level reaction to shepherdess and lost people.

¹ C.S. Lewis. Mere Christianity, p. 26,27.

You can think of it like a firefighter putting his own safety on the line for people they might never meet. After wild fires, there are the stories from the animal kingdom of parents shielding their vulnerable young from the dangers of the fire by using their own bodies as a barrier. That's what the compassion of Jesus did. He was moved by the mixed motivations in the crowd that clamored for him. He sensed the unbelief and skepticism with the customized religion and decided he needed to take action. He prioritized people when he put the cross over his own desire to avoid pain and suffering. He prioritized people when he suffered agony on the cross for people who live with Jesus as an add-on way low on their priority list for life. Jesus prioritized people when he experience hell for people who feel secure in half-baked spirituality. Jesus gave his life for people who won't inconvenience themselves beyond believing in some impersonal life force or the power of the universe.

Jesus isn't like any other pseudo-shepherd. Other leaders may be conflicted and selfish. Jesus effectively sacrifices himself for his flock. Other leaders can guide and instruct. Only Jesus can give you the true rest of forgiveness and true peace of a restored relationship with God. Jesus originally wanted to get away with his selected apostles. But when he prioritized people, he gives the crowds, the masses, all the people time to connect with their Shepherd. Relaxation and Rest originally intended for Apostles shared with all when he takes the time to instruct and teach.

Martin Luther was commenting on Psalm 1. He noted how God intends to bless us as we meditate on his Word. Taking that Word into our hearts is more than just seeing words and hearing sounds. We internalize the Word as Jesus instructs us, leads us to confess, opens our hearts to thanksgiving and inspires us to pray. Jesus wants to share his heart for people. The people in our world who are lost and confused. The people who don't know anything more about Jesus than that he is a nice guy with good advice. There's no conflicting priorities when you sit at the feet of Jesus and learn from him so you can lead more to know Jesus as their Savior and Shepherd. God grant it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

+ May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and work. +