

July 18, 2021
The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 11), Year B
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2 Samuel 7:1-14a
Psalm 89:20-37
Ephesians 2:11-22
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

During much of the church year, the assigned readings highlight a particular liturgical season or theme. As a result, from Sunday to Sunday we tend to swing around among books of the Bible and within books of the Bible. Only during the summer, the long green season after Pentecost, do we hear lengthier multi-week stretches of the biblical narrative. It's been nice over the summer to get a sense of the larger arc of the stories we've been hearing.

For several weeks, we've been hearing stories taken in order from the Gospel of Mark. Today, we hear more of Mark's narrative, but with a couple of chronological complications.

Complication one: Today's reading does pick up in Mark where we left off last week. If you were here last week, you will remember that we heard about Herod's execution of John the Baptist. Mark, for the most part, follows a chronological storyline. But with that story, Mark broke the chronology to report something that had already happened. To pick up on the chronology for the start of today's reading, we have to back up two weeks, to the preceding story.

Complication two: Today's reading gives us two bits of Mark while leaving out the huge chunk between those two bits. If you were looking at the service bulletin as I read the gospel, you will have seen an ellipse separating two paragraphs. I added the ellipse there to recognize how disjointed the two paragraphs seem when read straight through.

I began thinking about this reading by wondering what the creators of the lectionary were thinking. Why did they serve up these two bits of Mark in sequence? Isolated from their broader story lines, what holds these two bits together? To answer these questions, it's helpful to consider what we didn't hear--that is, what comes before the first part for today and what comes at the ellipse.

So let's back up two Sundays, to where the preceding story left off before that digression about John the Baptist. Then, Jesus had sent out the twelve, two by two, giving them "authority over unclean spirits." They were to bring only a staff, a tunic, and a pair of sandals apiece. As Mark says, it wrapped up with, "So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them." [Mark 6:12-13]

Now, in bit one for today, the twelve are back and reporting these results to Jesus. Apparently Jesus realizes that their work has been hard and that they need a break. He tries to take them away to a "deserted place" for a "rest." They all head out on a boat, but large numbers of people recognize them, and a mob outpaces them to their destination. Plans change. Jesus has compassion on the people and begins to teach them.

That brings us to that ellipsis in the middle of today's reading. It's not a simple aside. First comes the rather detailed story of Jesus teaching and miraculously feeding a crowd of five thousand men. Afterward, Jesus puts the disciples back on that boat so they can finally get away, while he stays behind to get rid of the crowd, and then he goes up a mountain to pray. But the disciples run into a storm on the sea. Jesus sees this from afar, walks to them across the water, and stills the storm.

Finally we arrive at the second bit of today's reading from Mark, the part after the ellipsis. The disciples have made it across the sea, with Jesus' help. But again large numbers of people recognize and mob them. Apparently there are sick people everywhere, and apparently Jesus decides to take care of them. All they have to do is touch the hem of Jesus' cloak, and they are healed.

Let's recap by returning to the question of why these two bits of Mark are served up together. It turns out that they give us a two-fold failed attempt by the disciples to get away. The rough sequence in each part is attempt, recognition, mobbing, and response. Keep reading, and Mark doesn't say whether those disciples ever do get away. But I like to think that they do.

The experts who write about this passage generally say that it's about *compassion*. We also heard that theme in the collect for the day. I agree with that. Jesus looks out on that sea of people, and he just can't help himself: he has to help. But what does this mean for us? Are we supposed to be as compassionate as Jesus? Are we supposed to be as long-suffering as the disciples?

Maybe. But the truth is, if those are our standards, we'll probably never get there. The impossibility of it is perhaps why we are so tempted to throw up our hands in discouragement and give up. But maybe that's because we're actually starting at the wrong point. Maybe our starting point is as a simple member of the mob, one of the multitudes of people who *recognize* and who are in need of healing.

It's a mob, but it's a mob made up of individuals. There are too many for Mark to offer up every one of their stories. But over the course of his gospel, he does offer up a number of stories. There are just enough to reassure us that every story is worth telling, every detail is worth hearing, every person is worth healing. Maybe a life of true faith involves interplay between giving and receiving compassion.

You hear the word *self-care* a lot these days. I'm sort of talking about that, and I'm sort of not. The trap of self-care is when it becomes the equivalent of a Band-Aid applied to a wound that ought to be taken to the emergency department. Even a scratch untended can turn into a life-threatening infection.

More broadly, I think Mark uses those crowds showing up for Jesus to indicate the presence of huge systemic problems. If the systems had been working well, those multitudes wouldn't have needed to be there. I don't think it's coincidental that Mark takes us from here to a tussle with the Pharisees, who are more concerned with satisfying legalism than with remedying suffering. Perhaps the language of compassion helps us to grapple with both the small and the large.

The news over the last week was bracketed by Richard Branson's space flight and the flooding in Europe. As much as I was fascinated by space travel as a child, I simply could not join in the cheering for the achievement of private commercial space flight. I know it's an oversimplification, and still I hear about Richard Branson and, soon, Jeff Bezos going into space and see it as the childish ego satisfaction of billionaires who have only one frontier left in which to outpace the competition. Much of the criticism of this week's space flight came in the form of concerns about environmental impact. That was only emphasized by the photographs of devastation coming out of Germany and Belgium and the Netherlands later in the week.

I was fascinated by space travel as a child. In college I even entertained thoughts about pursuing being an astronaut. So maybe, if I could afford it, I would buy a ticket with Jeff Bezos. But I hope not. Rather, I hope I will continue to look at how my actions are informed by my need for ego gratification, which might be just the opposite of considering how I need and deserve and might even receive compassion.

I do think Jesus calls us to be carriers of compassion. And, I think he calls us to recognize that we need and deserve to receive compassion. That can be a tough thing to admit. It's tough for me, and maybe it's tough for you, too. After all, we all swim in a damn-the-competition, pick-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps, don't-admit-you're-vulnerable culture. I'm going to say here that it feels worse here in New Haven than in other places I've lived. Now, maybe that's new Haven, or maybe it's a reflection of recent broader societal shifts over the last several years. I don't know.

So let me say it for all of us. *I* need and deserve compassion. *You* need and deserve compassion. I would even posit that we have to claim compassion before we can effectively carry it. Maybe that's really what that rest time is for. And maybe that's how to become a carrier of compassion: by resting. In claiming compassion, we're claiming Jesus, and our embrace of a life of faith in which God is both as close as our own heartbeat and as large as the universe.