

Preached by Carl Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22130
Sunday, July 19, 2009

Mark 6: 30–34; 53–56

TO TEACH, TO FEED, TO HEAL, AND TO SAVE

If we are to understand this passage today, we will have to grapple with what it really means to be compassionate—compassionate in a way which mirrors the passion of Christ. In this story, Jesus just has come from being compassionate toward a man with leprosy. He has healed him physically and spiritually. And now when he has compassion for the crowds, he not only feeds them, but he fills their souls with new meaning; and the compassion that he has for the crowd is both spiritual as well as tangible.

They are like sheep without a shepherd. This was clearly a chance to remind all who were in the region that their Jewish king, Herod, was supposed to behave more like a shepherd than he was to behave like royalty. True kings—compassionate, benevolent kings—care for their kingdoms and their subjects with the same attentiveness that a shepherd offers their flocks.

But Herod has not been such a king. He had abdicated his responsibility. Remember last week how he had had John the Baptist beheaded. How he had kneeled, in effect, to public opinion, afraid of what others might think of him; afraid even more of the real ruler of the kingdom (his wife who set the tone for that banquet last week—a celebration that ended in a burial, not in a renewal of life).

There's a clear contrast here. Jesus throws a banquet on a hillside, and in the process he teaches. He heals. He guides not only the people, but he guides his disciples to understand what they are to be for one another. When we in the church throw a celebration, does it look more like the one that Herod orchestrated—everybody in their place, everybody with a job assigned—or does it look more like God feeding the people of Israel in the wilderness?

Herod, no doubt, had a nice little party. But we are called to do so much more than just be party animals, aren't we? We are called to teach compassion within the discipline of God's kingdom. We are called to feed people not only physically, but we are called to feed one another spiritually.

We, just this morning, talked about the meaning of the priesthood of all believers as we gathered to examine our two deacon ordinands, Julie and Pat. It is a sacred calling to be a priest, and we have all been called to be priests like to one another—to hold in confidence one another's stories as if they had been shared in a confessional. We are called as people who are sent out into a world that needs direction, that needs compassion, not just for those at Herod's banquet, but for the ordinary people on the hillside.

It has been two-thousand years and we are still learning the lessons of the first apostles. We are to reflect a compassion that goes against everything we are taught for survival in this world. We are to offer one another a sense of readiness—not to send people somewhere else, but to invite people into our lives so that we might learn their stories.

I wonder if we are like disciples, all the more willing to cash in on rest and relaxation that someone else has promised us. In my work within the presbytery, I sometimes am allowed to be a pastor to other pastors. Recently I counseled a pastor who had resigned his position because he could no longer meet the needs; or, in his words, he could no longer meet *all* the needs of his congregation. I asked this pastor, “Who told you it was your job to meet *all* the needs of everyone in your congregation?” The response I received was, “All I can tell you, Carl, is when I went to work I felt like I was trying to catch all the crickets at church on an August evening.”

How many of you have become so involved with your work with the church that you feel your efforts are as futile, as overwhelming, as trying to capture all the chirping crickets on an August evening?” This is not the compassion that Jesus taught and this is not the lesson of his gathering the disciples on the hillside and telling them after they have gone out two by two, “Now that you have given, you must step back and receive.” They had forgotten to believe in Jesus more than in themselves. If we were an evangelical church, I’d ask for an “Amen!”

The real betrayal that unfolds in the rest of Mark, and the real betrayal that unfolds in the life of the church today, is that ordinary disciples, you and me, begin to believe that if we don’t do it, it won’t get done. If you’re guilty, say, “Amen!”

That’s real atheism. That’s what it means to not believe any longer—that if I don’t do it, it won’t happen. So who are we supposed to be? Exactly what are we supposed to do? You do it so often I think you forget. I make an announcement in one worship service asking for a family in crisis, and you overwhelm me with your response—your desire to help. I tell you of one pain and ask you for help, and my phone rings off the hook. I wonder how often I have told you, now that you have responded, to step back. Take a break for yourself.

When you suffer alongside someone else, do you recognize that you have given yourself so completely that when that time passes, you need to take time to receive? If we are going to share the compassion of Christ, we are also going to have to learn how to rest—how to have boundaries, boundaries that are healthy. Not to be always out there as the first response, but certainly out there. Boundaries that say, “No, I can’t do that. I would like to ... maybe next time.”

Every time I ask one of you to do something specific, I try my hardest to make it easy for your to say no. It is very difficult, because I know when *the pastor* calls, there’s an enormous amount of guilt and duty and responsibility that wells up within our Presbyterian hearts. And I wonder if we can develop—I know we can develop—a reputation for

being a church that invites people in to rest and be still, as well as a church that sends people out.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are learning not only to sense one another's needs and life conditions, we are learning how exhausting it is to really suffer with one another—to not ignore the pain or the dynamics in the lives of those around us. For those of you who would like to have a handout every Sunday for worship (experiences of what to take away from the sermon), take out that pencil in the pew racks in front of you, and write this down. Rehearse it this week. I'm serious ... that wasn't rhetorical.

You know how it works. You meet another human being, especially someone that you see every week. You simply say, "You seem especially happy today. Is there anything you'd like to talk about?" See how different that is than, "How are you?" That really invites the person to share. You see someone who has gone through a transition in their life. Are you courageous enough to say, "So what's it like now that the kids are all gone? What's it like now that you've changed jobs? What is life like now that someone close to you is gone? Or what's it like now that you're back in school—or you're out of school and you still are searching? What's it like to teach ... to feed ... to heal ... to save? Because, you are all doing it. Very often, I think you're doing it without gratitude or recognition.

We all have those favorite scenes in movies. I think maybe I apply this one too often. It's a very different situation. But I just can't express or feel what I say when Richard Gere rides up in the white limo and climbs the fire escape and says to Julia, "So what did the princess do when the knight saved her?" Do you remember her response? "She saved him right back."

You are the channel of salvation for those around you. You have received salvation, surely. But you are now also the conduit for that new life experience that we share as one community. We never stop learning how to teach or be taught—how to feed and be fed, how to heal and be healed by those around us, how to experience salvation and how to offer it to others.

This is God's lesson for us today. God will work through us. And when God does, we need to take a break—nothing less than a break.

So may it be in our lives, now and always. Amen.