

*Sermon for Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 23, 2006*

Mark 6.30-44

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 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.** And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 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.** When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.” But he answered them, “**You give them something to eat.**” They said to him, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?” And he said to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” When they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

Dear Jesus, you know how we come and go, not even having time to sit and eat. And so you invite us to come away to a deserted place and rest. We are like sheep without a shepherd. Have compassion on us. We are listening. Amen.

The feeding of the 5,000. If any text speaks to our 21st century lifestyle, it is this 1st century gospel of Mark that holds up a mirror so we can take a good, long look at ourselves. We hear this story so often (it’s recorded in all 4 gospels) that its familiarity can keep us from hearing it fresh for today. This morning I will not be focusing so much on the part of the story we all know so well – how Jesus turns 5 loaves and 2 fish into a banquet for thousands. Instead, I invite you to listen to this gospel first hand- through the eyes and ears of the apostles and the crowd. Listen for what it is teaching you and me about the choices we make each day that impact the quality of our lives - our exterior, active lives and relationships, and our interior, prayerful lives – our lives in Christ?

“The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 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. Can you identify with the apostles?

Remember, they have just returned from being sent out to begin their new calling – you know how it is beginning a new job or project that you truly are excited about– the energy you bring to tasks, the expectations for everything you plan to accomplish, the extra hours that will make sure you get the results you want. So, imagine the apostles coming back to Jesus telling him how much they have done and taught, and Jesus cuts right through to the heart of things – he knows- **they haven't even had time to eat!** So he responds: “You need to take time off to be by yourselves. Let's go away to this deserted area I know.” **You need to rest.**

“Now many saw the apostles going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As Jesus 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.” **Might you identify with the large crowd hurrying to find Jesus and his followers.** You want to hear what Jesus is saying, you want to see him, and be in the same space with him. You don't really even think about what you're doing, you just know that Jesus can satisfy some longing that you have. Perhaps you are going through a rough time – maybe your job is no longer satisfying as it has, or you have become distant from your friends or spouse, or life just doesn't have the meaning it used to. There's no one in your life to guide you and help you understand what it all means. So, you have heard about Jesus and you decide to go along with the crowd, hoping for relief from your monotony, or hope for your despair. Jesus sees your distress and knows that **you are like sheep without a shepherd.** And so he turns his full attention to you and begins to teach you many things. I wonder what Jesus says to you? I wonder what he wants to teach you?

Whether you imagine yourself in the scene as an overworked, tired, hungry disciple, or as one of the crowd who feels lost and longs for a voice of assurance and hope, this story speaks to us all. Our lifestyles - whether employed, caring for a family, or retired, involve daily schedules are jam packed with obligations, deadlines, things to do and people to interact with. When do we find the time to breathe? When do we find the time **to just be** with ourselves– and then, I wonder, when do we ever find the time **to just be with God?**

When Jesus invites his apostles to come away and when he shows compassion on the crowds and gives them his full attention, he is calling them all to a time of sabbath – time to rest and listen to his voice.

To rest from the things we do has been ordained by God from the beginning of creation as something right and good, and holy. God was finished with the work he had been doing, God rested on the seventh day. Taking time to stop and rest allows us to mark a boundary – to acknowledge our limitations. But it’s hard. Even to set aside our thoughts about things that we need to do is difficult in a culture of non-stop, fast-paced activity. Cell phones, instant text messaging, emails, faxes, lap top computers and blackberries all keep us hooked into a sense of urgency. We get caught up and we forgot to take care of our own needs. How do we “turn it all off” and really “get away”? Jesus’ words “*come away to a deserted place and rest a while*” beckon us, just as they did his disciples.

As we imagine ourselves in this story, we also need to look at Jesus. He calls us away and yet he doesn’t get any time alone. He must be tired, yet, he has the ability to make himself truly available for those who are physically hungry and spiritually in need. Jesus feels compassion for the crowd, not annoyance that they have interrupted his attempt to get away. He knows that they need to hear his words of wisdom that will speak directly to their lives. Jesus is our model for that interplay between the interior and exterior life. His own indwelling with God, the Father is grounded so deeply in his outer life of activity and social interactions that whenever he does withdrawal from others it is for the sake of his mission. His interweaving of action and prayer doesn’t allow for any separating these two areas of his being. His life is what one writer calls “active prayer and prayerful action.**”**

This **availability** that Jesus has for the crowd extends to that moment of grace when a miracle occurs for those who are hungry and for those apostles who think they have little to offer. Jesus takes the 5 loaves and 2 fish and does what he always does – he provides an abundance of what is needed. Jesus shows us the extent of his generous availability to be with us and for us – no matter how little we feel we have to offer him. Jesus takes the loaves, looks to heaven, blesses and breaks them, giving the pieces to his apostles to distribute among the hungry crowd.

When we take the time to be with God – to rest in God’s presence and offer ourselves to God, just as we are, God will take whatever it is we have and use it in ways that will surprise and I think, please us, rather than just give us more to do. God will fill our empty spaces, refresh our tired minds and bodies as we grow in the knowledge of God’s abiding, loving abundance in

our lives. When we say, *“Take Lord and receive what little I have to give to you...all is yours anyway, you have given all to me,”* God will return our gifts and teach us to act in ways that will bring balance to our busy lives, and I believe, will inspire us to work for peace and justice in a world that is so desperate for all of us to join that mission.

Holy Eucharist –the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Table - is the center of our Christian lives and is the action that binds us together as community. Can our own hunger for spiritual food connect us to our brothers and sisters who hunger for their daily bread of food, employment, shelter, or self-esteem? When we become conscious, listening participants in the Eucharist, we will become aware, not only of our need for God, but also of our basic interdependencies on one another.

This morning your presence here is a sign of your own commitment to take time to be with God, through this particular community of faith. Our worship together, hopefully a joyful experience, can strengthen our spiritual lives as we listen to God’s Word, and receive the bread and wine, the sacramental body and blood of Christ as spiritual food. We can offer ourselves to God at this table and ask God to bless and use us for God’s ongoing work in the world. And by doing this as a community, we deepen our fellowship with each other and deepen our calling to be **–like Jesus, our teacher,–** compassionate people who are available as bread for one another.
Amen.