

Sheep Without a Shepherd
Mark 6:30-34, 5-56
July 18, 2021
First Presbyterian, Luling

Around, oh, say, mid-July every summer, I start losing my patience. I'm ready for school to start back. Now last summer, I had to give myself a good talking-to, because I knew that school was going to be at home for a good while, and I needed to pace myself. But this summer, I've reverted to my former pattern. You'll note that today is July 18, which is just about mid-July, and true to form, I'm ready for summer to be over and school to start. Summer seems endless. And monotonous. And way too dependent on me being entertaining, and me being with two certain people all day long, every day. Not coincidentally, the first day of school for us is in exactly one month, August 18, but who's counting?

I'm being self-focused and self-indulgent, but I identify all too well with Jesus and the disciples, as they are attempting to find a moment to themselves, without being interrupted by the crowds. Crowds, two kids, same difference.

The disciples have returned and re-gathered after having been sent out by Jesus, two by two, to heal and teach. They haven't had a chance to stop and catch their breath or even eat, so Jesus suggests that they go to a deserted place by boat, somewhere on the Sea of Galilee. That suggestion doesn't work. The crowds figure out where they're going, and race ahead by foot and are there waiting for them when the boat arrives. I can only guess that the crowds want to tell them one more weird fact they learned on YouTube, make a snack, get a clean glass even though there are seventeen used glasses on the counter, and whine about their siblings. Actually, that's not what the crowds want. They want to be healed, they want to be fed, body and soul.

The huge chunk of verses that the lectionary skips this morning are ones that we'll come back to in the coming weeks: Jesus feeding this very same crowd of 5000 hungry people, and Jesus walking on the water. When we skip ahead, we find that the crowd is still there in yet another place along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Still. There. This time, reaching out to be healed, hoping to touch the fringe of Jesus's garment, like the woman in the crowd from a couple of Sunday ago. The crowds, throughout this section of Mark, are just relentless. Like one-month-till-school-starts-summer-is-lasting-forever relentless.

What is the reaction to relentless crowds? Well, if you're me and it's one month till school starts, your patience is a bit short. There is some eye-rolling. Some strategic time outs—and not for the kids, for the parents. There's some commiserating with fellow parents, as long as those fellow parents are not also teachers. Essentially, a grin and bear it reaction. I imagine that the disciples had that reaction, at least some of the time, too. They were the ones who had followed Jesus most closely, yet they never got any time with him to themselves, because of these crowds? I'm guessing that they allowed themselves to feel a tiny bit resentful and jealous, every once in a while.

But Jesus does not do any of that. No eye rolling. No commiserating. No impatience. Mark says that Jesus looked on the crowd and saw not a needy mass of people demanding his time and attention and interrupting him. He saw sheep without a shepherd.

This is an interesting comment for Mark to make. He doesn't have Jesus saying it—it's a narrator's comment. I look at the demanding crowds and see people not being orderly or polite and overwhelming. Jesus sees the crowds and sees the whole system, that has left them without effective leadership or care, so that they are desperate to see a street preacher who might feed and heal them. When I see the crowd, I judge the crowd. When Jesus sees the crowd, he judges their leaders—the absent shepherds.

And it *is* a judgment, a negative one. The Old Testament prophets, over and over, used that "sheep without a shepherd" phrase to condemn the kings who were not honoring God and not caring

for the people. You can hear one example in that Jeremiah passage that I read. Our verses today from Mark immediately follow that horrifying story we read last week of Herod having John the Baptist beheaded. Mark has just interrupted the story line to tell about Herod, their political leader, failing to exercise the bare minimum of moral judgment. And then says that Jesus saw the crowd as sheep without a shepherd. This is not an accident. Make no mistake, this is a judgment, a condemnation, against their supposed leader, Herod. He's not leading them. He's not being moral or faithful to God or caring for the people. He's not being a good shepherd.

But it's more than just a judgment about what a bad shepherd Herod is. Jesus sees the crowd "with compassion." That Greek word is more graphic than that, because it has to do with intestines. We might say something like, "Jesus had a gut wrenching feeling of compassion," or we might say a little stronger, "their leaderless condition made him sick to his stomach." "Moved to tears" has the same impact with less body part imagery.

What strikes me is that Jesus's gut reaction, literally, his first instinct—not thought out or logical, but pure instinct—is compassion. Jesus's gut reaction is compassion for the people. Not eye rolling or judgment or impatience or disgust or suspicion of their motives. But compassion.

And it's interesting how Jesus turns that compassion to action. The first thing he does, Mark says, is begin to teach them. And then, in the verses we skipped, he feeds them. And then at the end of the chapter, he heals them. Body, mind, spirit. Jesus's compassion isn't limited to one kind of need. It isn't a limited commodity.

When people are irritating, intimidating, interrupting, confounding, confusing, withdrawn, hurtful, rude or any other number of things people can be...what would it be like if our gut level response were to be compassionate. To discern what the people needed, body, mind, and spirit. And to provide it as best we could. It seems to me that the world would be a far different and far better place, if we reacted immediately with compassion to meet the needs that confront us.