

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

We don't know who steered the boat in today's passage from Mark's gospel, but it's not farfetched to think that Jesus picked up a paddle or set the sail. After all, it was his idea to get into the vessel, and he had preselected the destination: a place he knew, away from the crowd. Mark explains the reasons they wanted to get away: too much social contact and too little food. The apostles had just come back from mission to report their activities to Jesus. They were so successful that people were coming and going in great numbers, demanding their attention, and the apostles had no time even to eat. We can all relate: other people may make so many demands on our time that we don't eat properly. However, these particular verses don't tell us the horrible event that had just happened. According to Mark in the preceding verses, King Herod had just beheaded John the Baptist, and the disciples of John had laid his body in a tomb. It's not farfetched to think that Jesus had just learned about the death of John, the preacher who baptized him, inaugurating Jesus' own mission. Imagine the realization sinking in: John was dead. John was murdered. John was murdered by the king. This could be another reason Jesus wanted to get away from the crowd with his own disciples: to process this event in solitude.

Yet, as sometimes happens when we receive devastating news, others in this gospel seem unaware of its impact on Jesus. The crowd quickly figured out where he was headed and ran around on foot to cut him off. When Jesus and the disciples disembarked—stressed, hungry and grieving—the crowd was already there. Jesus did not yell at them, saying, “Can't you just leave us alone for a little while?” He did not ignore them. He did not politely thank them for coming and send them on their way. Instead, Mark says, when he “saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them... and he began to teach them many things.” Jesus discovered compassion inside his heart, and that moved him to continue his mission without rest.

Mark describes the crowd this way: “they were like sheep without a shepherd.” We can all relate: When we start new work, a new relationship, or a new year at school, we aren't sure what to do at the beginning. And often when we have free time, we may wander to unfruitful activities. Our choice of mentors and role models is as critical as our choices for spending our time. At critical junctures in our lives we are all sheep without a shepherd, and we are in peril if we choose the wrong shepherd.

How important it is then in our positions of responsibility, whenever we feel overworked and hungry, to find within us the same compassion Jesus discovered. He could have felt sorry for himself after the death of John, but instead his moment of loss inspired him to become the shepherd the people needed. John was gone; someone had to take up the slack. Jesus sacrificed his needs for theirs. It wasn't ambition that drove him to teach that day; it was compassion.

When we are sheep, it's important to find the right shepherd. When we are shepherds, it's important to lead the sheep. We may at times feel as though we cannot do it right now. But one virtue will strengthen us to steer our boat for the task ahead: compassion.

Sunday, July 18, 2021