

A Sermon for the
7th Sunday after Pentecost
July 19, 2009
Texts: Jeremiah 23:1-6
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.”
Jeremiah 23:1-4

“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 for awhile.’ 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 they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about the whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.” Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. These were the disciples that Jesus had previously sent out, to go into the towns and villages of Galilee to bring his message and to extend Jesus’ compassion to the people there, especially those who were suffering, the sick, the poor. Mark seldom refers/ disciples as “the apostles,” only in the context of their going out on a mission for Jesus. He doesn’t do so as a title for them as they would later be known, the Apostle Peter or the Apostle John, with a capital “A”. No, “apostolos” is simply the general term for those who are sent on a mission, those who are designated as representatives of another. As today’s gospel begins, those who had been sent have returned, and they are sharing with Jesus “all that they had done and taught,” which, from the sound of things, was a lot. Because Jesus’ response to them is something like, “You guys must be exhausted, why don’t we get away by ourselves for awhile, relax, and get some rest.”

For their time had been completely filled up with helping all of the people who kept coming to them, such that they hardly even had time to eat.

The “busyness” of Jesus’ ministry is reiterated in the later section of today’s reading where Mark offers a kind of summary of what was going on. Wherever they heard he was, in whatever village, city, or farm they visited, the people would rush to bring the sick to wherever he was, begging him - them - to help them, that they might even just touch the fringe of his coat and be healed. Harking back to the story of the woman with the hemorrhage who was healed when she reached out and touched Jesus’ cloak.

But what seems to be clear is that it doesn’t take long for the word to get out, and the extent of human need is endless. Jesus and the disciples can no longer go anywhere without being mobbed. A case in point being what happens to them when they try to get away to a deserted place for some rest. They get in their boat to sail to an uninhabited area, people see them leave, and just follow them on the shore until they find them. So that when they land they find a huge crowd waiting for them. They appear to Jesus like sheep without a shepherd, and he has compassion for them. And like a good shepherd he, along with those who had been sent, cares for them. Eventually, in the major miracle that is excluded from the center of the reading today, in several senses he fulfills the 23rd Psalm, they no longer want, he makes them lie down in green pastures, leads them beside still waters, he prepares a “table” for them, that is, he feeds them, and the meal overflows with abundance. All the product of the great compassion he had for them.

This week more disciples become apostles, that is, become one’s how are sent, are sent on a mission. While Jesus severely restricted what his disciples were to take on their mission - taking nearly nothing - no food, no bag, no money, only the clothes they were wearing, and their sandals on their feet - we will be a little more accommodating with the apostles this week. We will have bags, we will have food, we will have money, and I certainly hope more than one change of clothes. But the mission will be the same. Just as those first apostles, these new ones are being sent to bring the compassion of Jesus to the city of New Orleans. There we will aim to make the kingdom of God visible in what we do and what we say. We are going to learn about the human need that is still great in that city, and do what we can alleviate it.

I anticipate that, I hope that, these new apostles also experience something that, I would bet, those first apostles experienced. That as much as their ministry to the people they encountered blessed, renewed and transformed those peoples lives, their own lives were transformed as well. This the paradox of discipleship that Jesus always spoke of. By giving your life you will find life. In giving yourself for others in the name of Jesus, in bringing the blessing of Jesus’ compassion to others, you will experience blessing. The apostles returned blessed, transformed, by their mission. When they returned they gathered around Jesus and had to tell everything they had done, everything they had experienced. They couldn’t help themselves, so inspired were they by their experience. When these new apostles return they will have stories to tell, excitement to be shared, evidence of transforming experience to reveal. The people of New Orleans will be blessed by their coming, and they will be blessed by the joy of giving and serving.

Pastor Thom Erich in his comments this week about today’s gospel talked about how right now we are in the season of denominational conventions. Right now the Episcopalians are

meeting, the Methodists met earlier this month. In about three weeks we Lutherans will be on display in Minneapolis. Of course, all of the talk surrounding the conventions, in the news reporting, is about the latest fight, controversy, to create unrest in church bodies. The ELCA Churchwide Assembly is brewing up to be a contentious one also and will certainly, for that reason, attract national news attention. And for many, Pastor Erich commented, that is their picture of the church, fighting over issues, arguing over doctrines, and wrestling over power, whose in charge. When what the church is or should be about is what Jesus and those he sent out were doing, going into the cities, and villages, and farms, to the marketplaces where human needs are to be found, and there engage in compassionate care.

I have to heartily agree with Pastor Erich. While national conventions are necessary for doing the business of the church institution, and meetings like ELCA assembly that is coming will probably attract much more attention in the news media. That is not really the church. What is really the church is what will be happening this week in New Orleans. 37,000 apostles sent into the neighborhoods and parks and marketplaces of New Orleans bringing the compassion of Jesus, inspired to serve and bring a blessing to the hurting people of that city. And I look forward to being blessed and inspired in return by an experience of the church really engaged in what the church is to be about, embodying God's love in the world. That is my fervent hope. And I look forward to returning here, gathering around Jesus, and telling all about what we have seen and done. Amen