

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

SERMON for July 21, 2024

LIKE SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD

Pr Doreen McFarlane

Today's scripture lesson, from the Gospel of Mark, takes place right after the tragedy of the death of John the Baptist, who was beheaded by King Herod. Just before that, we were told that Jesus had commissioned his disciples to start a new kind of mission. He had sent them out, telling them to go to surrounding towns and villages. He sent them two by two – and advised them to stay in people's homes – at least in homes where they'd be made welcome. And, Jesus had given them authority to do the things he had been doing – that is to heal the sick and to cast out demons.

As our lesson begins today, the disciples had just returned to Jesus. They gathered around him and were most anxious to tell him about all their successes. But Jesus must also have known they were exhausted and needed to rest and pray. He tells them they ought to come away with him to a deserted place and rest a while!

The disciples obeyed him and did go away by boat. But, too much had happened already and too many people had too many needs, and there was to be no rest for any of them that day. By the time they came ashore, they saw the people had already beat them to it, and were there ahead of them.

But, as we might expect, Jesus takes all this in stride and deals with the people with great love. The scripture today puts it this way: It says "Jesus had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." (Interestingly enough, this phrase "like sheep without a shepherd" is found very early in the Bible, at Numbers 27 verse 17 in the Old Testament. Moses is getting old and exhausted and he tells God that the people are "like sheep without a shepherd". So, in response, God chooses Joshua to be their new leader/their new shepherd.) Now it is Jesus who recognizes that he can get no rest because the people need him. So, here in the Gospel of Mark, we are told that Jesus went right back to work, teaching and healing the people.

Jesus understood that he would always be responsible to do what he could for all those who came to him. There are times in our lives too when the needs of the world seem to be just too much; too overwhelming. But there is a lesson here – both in that Old Testament book of Numbers and now in the New Testament gospel of Mark. And the lesson is this. It is our responsibility, our duty, not to go out and save the world.

(We know we can't do that anyway!) But it is our duty, at least as far as we are able, to be there for those people, those individuals who God has placed in our path.

Some people we know are just such good examples of this kind of love – of God's kind. And some of them, especially a lot of younger people today. There is, just for example, a woman in her forties who lives in Oakville. She has a full time job, two children and a husband to care for, and a decent sized house to keep clean. (We'll call her Karen.) But, in addition to those responsibilities, Karen keeps taking on opportunities for service that are beyond the call of duty. She volunteers to drive cancer patients to their chemo and radiation treatments. She organizes a twice yearly "neighborhood cleanup" where she gathers neighbors, they do the work, and then they socialize in her backyard (at her expense) to celebrate the work they have done! In addition, she is currently training up a 'guide dog hopeful' who, if he passes his dog exams, will be working with an autistic child to keep that child safe. Karen gives when donations are requested. She recommends people for jobs when they ask her. On weekends, she often watches over the child of a neighbor who can't get childcare. Here's how I see it. Karen is just more aware than many other people of how many of her neighbors and friends are "like sheep without a shepherd." She asks nothing in return. She would not even say she does any of it for religious reasons, but she is simply a role model for caring.

Too many people in this world today are "like sheep without a shepherd." We can't help them all. But the ones we CAN help, I believe, are those that God has placed right in front of us. We are God's hands and hearts in this world and we are called to help them as best we can. Maybe there is no one in front of you right now. And maybe we don't see them because they are our own family. But, we are called today, as Jesus did, to open our eyes and simply look up! Many of you give food to the food drives where we gather food for the needy, here at the church. That is another way we can help. If each one of us is willing to do something for our community or to help just one person, it may be that, even in some very small way, the world will become a better place.
AMEN.