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Sermon for Pentecost 9

July 21, 2024

Living on the Word

Mark 6:30–44

³⁰The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³²And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. ³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. ³⁵And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. ³⁶Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” ³⁷But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” And they said to him, “Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?” ³⁸And he said to them, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” And when they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” ³⁹Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. ⁴¹And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. ⁴²And they all ate and were satisfied. ⁴³And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. ⁴⁴And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men.

Today’s Gospel demonstrates a connection between Christ’s concern for feeding our bodies and the feeding of our souls through His Word, both of which were administered by His Apostles in the text at hand.



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The Apostles returned to Jesus after preaching and teaching; they were exhausted from dealing with the crowds of people. So, Jesus drew them away to a desolate place to rest and be refreshed. The crowds, however, in their eager pursuit of Christ and His Apostles, discovered where they were going, and arrived at the place ahead of them. So Jesus, moved with compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd, began to teach them many things. In fact, He taught them until very late in the day.

And, of course, we know what happens then: His disciples came to Him, suggesting that, due to the lateness of the hour, He send them away to go and find themselves something to eat. He said, "You give them something to eat." They responded by virtually showing Him their empty wallet, and He proceeded to work the miracle of multiplying the loaves and fishes to feed more than five thousand people, the apostles included.

Now, it's important when contemplating a passage of Scripture to consider its context. To that end, we should remind ourselves of the events which occurred just prior to and just after this event. Jesus had just preached in His home town of Nazareth, and was rejected there. He then sent out the apostles, who themselves would suffer rejection, despite the many miraculous signs He gave them the authority to do. Mark also relates, as we discussed last week, the beheading of John the Baptist.

So, all of this is the backdrop of events for today's Gospel, and in all these things, do we not see the shadow of the Cross already being cast upon the mission of the Church: the rejection of Christ and His Apostles by the world, and the ultimate rejection of execution which would certainly not end with John the Baptist. Jesus, too, as we know, would be rejected and killed, and His disciples would be called to take up the cross and follow Him.

But in today's text, we see for the moment a more promising response of the crowds to Christ and His Apostles. So many people are coming and going, in fact, that the Apostles have no time even to eat or catch their breath. They're pushed past the point of exhaustion by the demands of the sheep, who are in desperate need of these shepherds sent by Christ.

They had been given a taste of the gospel, and it was making them hungry for more. For through His Apostles, Christ had been feeding the flock both with His Words and His deeds of mercy.

The reality of sin has brought hunger and hurt into the world and into the lives of all people, to this very day. Christ brought nourishment and healing for this world of sinful people. But this means first of all the preaching of repentance, exposing sin for what it truly is, and then providing the only real answer in the Cross and Resurrection of Christ.

Unfortunately, the crowds surrounding Jesus were attracted to the miracles and physical blessings, but gave little thought to the Cross as the source of all life, nourishment, and healing. But *these* people, quite unlike people today, were at least able to recognize



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the best source in answer to their needs, having run on foot from all over to get to Christ and His Apostles.

If only we in our day would have such a zeal for the Lord and His Word! And if only we would learn to see in ourselves – in our own needs – the devastating consequences of our sin; and then learn to see in the Ministry of Christ and His Apostles the gospel of forgiveness as the cure for sin and as the source of our life and salvation.

Now, because the crowds didn't understand the real significance of everything that was happening, Jesus' mission, as He made His journey to the Cross, was one of teaching – to "catechize" the people in preparation for His Cross – and to lay the foundation for the Church that He would establish by His Cross and Resurrection. This work of catechizing – or *teaching* – is the Savior's first and foremost task as the Shepherd of the sheep. It's the rod and staff with which He tends His flock.

In today's Old Testament, we see some of the early groundwork for this. The description of "shepherds" there refers to the prophets and kings of Israel, and to all those who were entrusted in some way with authority over God's people. But, far too many of these shepherds had failed in their leadership. The Prophet Jeremiah, among others, was called by the Lord to preach and write against their evil neglect and abuse of the sheep.

At the heart of the Lord's condemnation of these evil shepherds is their neglect to feed and care for the flock – because they had no real concern or care for the sheep. So, the Lord says that these evil shepherds would be removed and destroyed. For the Lord Himself is and remains the Shepherd of His sheep at all times. And He will gather those who have been scattered, bind up those who have been wounded, and lead the entire flock into green pastures. What's more, He promises to raise up faithful shepherds after His own heart to feed and care for the sheep in His stead.

We see this fulfilled throughout the Gospels. Jesus comes to be the Shepherd of His sheep, to lay down His life for theirs – for yours and mine. At the same time, He calls and sends His Apostles to be shepherds after His own heart; He prepares them for the time following His Ascension, when they will be entrusted with the care and nurture of His Church. And following in their footsteps, He will raise up other pastors for His sheep, who will feed the flock with His Word. But always it's Christ Himself who is shepherding His flock through the agency of these undershepherds.

That's still very much the purpose, benefit, and reality of the Holy Ministry; that in the preaching of the Word, in the waters of Holy Baptism, in the Body and Blood of Jesus, it is Christ Himself who continues to address our sin with the forgiveness of His cross – and this alone is the solution for all that we have to deal with in this world, and in preparation for the next. That's the responsibility of those who are sent as the Apostolic Ministers of Christ, as shepherds of His flock.



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However . . . the Apostles, too, needed to rest and be fed by Christ. These men were not self-sustaining; they could not give to others what they themselves were not receiving from Christ. That's why they had to go off by themselves with Jesus, and why they had to report to Him what they had been doing and teaching in His Name.

In relationship to the world, the Apostolic Ministers of Christ are His ambassadors and personal representatives; they speak and act in His Name and with His authority . . . "as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself," so the Catechism says. But in relationship to Christ, these very same men are poor, miserable, sinners (just like you), who deserve nothing but punishment, but who live (as you do) solely by the gracious mercy and forgiveness of their Lord, Jesus Christ.

And so, they need to go away by themselves with Jesus for a while, to have their "batteries recharged." He calls the apostles to rest with the very same Word He used to call them to be disciples. In other words, He calls them once again to follow Him, to learn from Him, and to receive His gifts.

And this they did by going away to a "desolate place" – into the wilderness. That should ring a bell for us. This "desolate place" is the wilderness of Sinai, where the Children of Israel wandered on their Exodus from slavery until they entered the Promised Land of milk and honey. It's the place of repentance and humility, where the people of God have to rely on Him alone. It's where the Apostles had to learn that they were able to feed the world only as Christ was feeding them.

And we, too, have to spend time in the wilderness, do we not? To be confronted there by our sinfulness and the inadequacy of our own resources, but also to be nourished by the Lord and fed by His hand. Wherever He has put us in this world, whatever responsibilities we may have in our various callings, it's tempting for all of us to be carried away by our activities and work – for the Lord and for others – and in the process to forget that we, too, live only by His grace and provision.

That's the most fundamentally significant aspect of our text today: The Apostles had to set aside their own works and efforts, in order to receive the gracious gifts of Christ. Having been sent out in His Name and in His stead, with the authority to heal diseases and cast out demons, it would no doubt have been very easy for them to get caught up in the excitement of their teaching and miracles, puffed up by the privilege of speaking and acting for Jesus. And so they needed to be reminded that they, too, were sinful men, who must depend upon the forgiveness of the Cross for their life and salvation.

Case in point: The Apostles had been so busy with their ministry to others, that they didn't have time to eat. Jesus had to provide that opportunity . . . not only for physical food, but also for the food that only He could give. The Apostles had to rest from their labors, and eat the bread of life freely given to them by Jesus. This would be their Sabbath Rest in Christ.

But if the Apostles were given rest, wouldn't the crowds then be left without



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shepherds? This had been their problem before; the sheep had been neglected and led astray by those who were supposed to be their shepherds. So, were the Apostles now to be taken away from them, so soon after beginning the task of gathering these sheep into the fold of Christ?

In His compassion even for His apostles, Jesus has personally stepped in to feed the flock and give them rest. The day would come soon enough when He would entrust them (and their successors) with the awesome task of shepherding the flock in His stead until the final judgment. But for now – prior to the cross and resurrection – their work as Apostles and shepherds was preliminary, because Christ Himself was visibly present in His own flesh to feed the sheep with the words of His mouth and the works of His hands. The Apostles would carry the cross in due time; but only after Christ had first carried it for them . . . just as He has carried it for you. The Apostles would feed the flock with the Word of God, as pastors do to this day; but only after – and only *because* – Christ had first fed them.

You see, pastors and people alike need to live on the Word and Sacraments of Christ, which is not as obvious or as simple as it sounds, with so many other things pulling us away. Pastors are tempted to supplement the Gospel with all sorts of gimmicks and methods of marketing techniques and business strategies, just as they're tempted to operate on the basis of their own intelligence, their own energies, their own creativity, and so on. Congregations, too, are tempted to find their identity in social activities and programs, instead of Divine Worship. And individual Christians are tempted to rely on their own commitment, their own works and efforts, instead of on the Means of Grace. But there is no real life in any of these temptatious imitations.

Beloved, there is only one Bread of Life, and that is Jesus Christ – our crucified and risen Lord – who tends the flock with His own Word and the preaching of it; who washes us with water and His Word in Holy Baptism; who feeds and nourishes us with His own Body and Blood in Holy Communion.

Whenever we're tempted to fend for ourselves, He calls us back to Himself and to His Word, as He did just following our text, when He called the Apostles back into the boat (Mark 6:45); that is to say, back into His Church – at this point no longer as preachers, but as those who must hear and receive the Words and deeds of Christ for themselves.

Thanks be to God, our dear Lord leaves neither His sheep nor their shepherds to their own devices. For, in spite of our sins, our mistakes, and our constant failings, Christ our Good Shepherd continues to look out for us, coming after us with deep compassion for our plight . . . to feed us with Himself . . . to lead us always back to those quiet waters of our Baptism . . . to anoint our heads with the oil of His free forgiveness . . . and daily to prepare the Feast of His own Table before us with the Food of His Cross and the overflowing Cup of His Salvation.



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God grant that we may always eat this Feast from His own hand, to life everlasting, receiving peace, hope, and rest from Him. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen