

## Mark 6:30-56

<sup>30</sup>The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. <sup>31</sup>He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. <sup>32</sup>And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. <sup>33</sup>Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. <sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; <sup>36</sup>send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." <sup>37</sup>But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" <sup>38</sup>And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." <sup>39</sup>Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. <sup>40</sup>So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. <sup>41</sup>Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. <sup>42</sup>And all ate and were filled; <sup>43</sup>and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. <sup>44</sup>Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

<sup>45</sup>Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. <sup>46</sup>After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

<sup>47</sup>When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. <sup>48</sup>When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. <sup>49</sup>But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; <sup>50</sup>for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." <sup>51</sup>Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, <sup>52</sup>for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

## Compassion Over Compulsion

You've gotta be careful about celebrating our achievements too early. Athletes are notorious for celebrating too early. In 2014 in a football game between the University of Utah and the University of Oregon, Utah player Kaelin Clay *thought* he had a 79-yard touchdown reception; the problem was that he let go of the ball just a little too early, before he had actually stepped into the end zone. While he and his teammates are celebrating in the end zone, someone on the Oregon defense realized that the referee had not signaled a touchdown and the ball was still in play, ruled as a fumble. An Oregon player eventually gained possession of the fumbled ball and ran it 100 yards in the other direction and scored a touchdown for Oregon. That was not a good day for Clayton Clay.

And this was not a good day for the disciples in today's Gospel reading. Earlier in the chapter (vs. 7), Jesus sends his disciples out in twos, with power to heal and cast out demons. The disciples now return and are excited tell Jesus all about their adventures and accomplishments. And it's interesting that there are no commendations or congratulatory remarks from Jesus. He just says, "Come with me to a deserted place and rest awhile." So

they get into the boat and head off to a deserted place only to find that a crowd had seen where the boat was heading, and beat them to the deserted place so it wasn't deserted anymore. So Jesus, feeling compassion for these "sheep without a shepherd" starts teaching them. **What happens next is interesting. It's getting late and the disciples advise Jesus to send the crowd home so they can get something to eat, and Jesus says, "You get them something to eat." He then proceeds to feed 5000 + folks. Then he sends the disciples out on the boat and they get caught in a nasty storm, and who should come to the rescue at dawn but Jesus.** And then this passage ends with an interesting phrase: "And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened." The disciples probably felt that they deserved a pat on the back for demons they'd cast out and the people they'd healed, but instead they're humbled first because they did not have the faith to believe that a crowd could be fed on five loaves and two fish, and despite all their accomplishments in prior days they could not maneuver this boat through a squall. Despite all their powers, they still had a lot to learn. By the end of the night the score was Jesus 2, Disciples 0. And the passage ends with the a rather negative statement with regard to the disciples: And they were utterly astounded,<sup>52</sup> for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

What didn't they get about the loaves? How were their hearts hardened? Well Jesus has just fed multitudes in the wilderness and walked on water. Mark describes him as a shepherd who had compassion for the people. Can you think of anyone in the Old Testament who fed multitudes in the wilderness and walked on water, someone who was considered a great shepherd of his people? How 'bout Moses? I think Mark is trying to make that point in this passage, but the disciples aren't getting it. Could it be that they fail to give Jesus the full recognition that he deserves as Savior and deliverer of his people?

We may be tempted to say the lesson is simply that Jesus is so much greater and more faith-full and more powerful than we'll ever be, but I don't think that's the message here. In John's gospel Jesus tells his disciples that they will do even greater works than he does (John 14:12). And though I think that it's clear that the works that we do in Jesus name are dependent upon how much faith we have – because unless we have faith we don't even *attempt* to do anything - I don't think that this passage is simply a poo-pooing on the disciples; I want us to look again at that verse back at the beginning of our reading for today: "(Jesus) said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.'" Now it's no fault of the disciples that that aren't able to reach a deserted place and rest for awhile, but how might this story have changed if they *had* come to a deserted place and rested for awhile?

The great Catholic priest and theologian Henri Nouwen wrote that "Solitude is the furnace of transformation."<sup>i</sup> Without solitude we are prone to temptation, three temptations in particular – the same temptations that Jesus faced in the Wilderness: The temptation to value ourselves based upon the work we do, the temptation to draw attention to ourselves, and the temptation to be powerful. It was in solitude, Nouwen suggests, that Jesus "affirmed God as the only source of his identity ('You must worship the Lord your God and serve him alone')."

"Solitude is the place of the great struggle and the great encounter - the struggle against the compulsions of the false self, and the encounter with the loving God who offers himself as the substance of the new self."

In rejecting all of the devil's temptation, Jesus kept affirming that what is more important than his own self was obedience and submission to the will of God. In the church we can be so tempted to accomplish things – to have a thriving Sunday School, to minister to the homeless, to bring lots of folks in to worship – but none of that is as important as building a relationship with God. We may love getting a lot of attention and having a lot of power and authority – to be the head of this committee or that ministry – but none of it matters when you don't have a humble heart and a yearning to follow the will of God. Remember the story of Mary and Martha, when Jesus comes to visit their home, and Martha is in the kitchen getting a meal together while Mary is in the living room listening to Jesus, and Martha complains: *"Look at all that I'm doing while my lazy sister just sits there listening to you."* And what does Jesus say? "Martha, Martha. You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen correctly." The focus needs to be on listening to God. Because it is through our listening to God we develop true compassion that helps us beat those temptations to glorify ourselves.

Starting in the second century there were many Christians who traveled into the deserts of Egypt, seeking solitude, because it's in solitude that we can concentrate on prayer and on our own sins – in the city it's too easy to focus on the sins of others, but when we're by ourselves we have no one but ourselves to look at. And when we see ourselves in relation to God, we begin to truly experience the compassion of God – in our scripture reading today, Jesus sees this crowd that has followed him and his disciples to this "deserted" place, and Mark writes that Jesus "had compassion for them." When we spend that time in that deserted place, with just ourselves and God, we see our own sins and God's infinite grace, the compassion that leads him to tend to us regardless of our own sin. And in solitude we learn to transmit that compassion to others. H. Stephen Shoemaker, a pastor from North Carolina, relates a story from the desert tradition:

*A brother had committed a fault and was called before the council. The council invited the revered Abba Moses to join, but Abba Moses refused. They sent someone to get him, and he agreed to come. He took a leaking jug, filled it with water and carried it with him to the council. They saw him coming with the jug leaving a trail of water, and asked, "What's this?" Abba Moses said, "My sins run out behind me and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the error of another?" When the council heard these words they forgave the brother.<sup>ii</sup>*

Jesus is very intentional when he tells his disciples to "come away to a deserted place and rest for awhile." Particularly in this day and age of cell phones that blast information at us 24/7, we need our time alone with God, in order that our hearts would be transformed by God into compassionate hearts. This is what Jesus did before he started any ministry, and he did it throughout his ministry. We need to do the same so that all our ministries are carried out with the right heart and for the right reasons.

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<sup>i</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (1981).

<sup>ii</sup> H. Stephen Shepherd, "Sheep and Shepherds," found online at <http://www.religion-online.org/article/sheep-and-shepherds-mark-630-34-53-56/>