

Priorities
7th Sunday after Pentecost - July 19, 2009
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Today's Gospel reading from St. Mark is a tad cut-and-paste. There are 2 distinct sections, separated by 20 verses. What's missing is the feeding of the 5000; we'll examine St. John's treatment of that miracle for several weeks. I just wanted to point out that *today's* Gospel reading is a little herky-jerky, in more ways than one.

First, there's a summary sentence referring back to what we heard 2 weeks ago, when Jesus sent the disciples into Galilean villages to preach and heal. That, in turn, was interrupted by *last week's* story of the beheading of John the Baptist. Anyhow, after the disciples tell Jesus what they'd accomplished on their first "solo" mission, he tells them to rest. But the popularity of Jesus and his disciples causes the crowds to trail them like modern-day paparazzi following movie stars.

Jesus chooses to not avoid the crowds; he has compassion on them, and begins to teach them "many things." It's in the midst of this that the feeding of the 5000 occurs; immediately after that miracle, Jesus sends the disciples across the Sea of Galilee, once more in hopes of getting some well-earned and much-needed rest. He takes a short-cut on foot over the water, leading to some consternation amongst his followers before they all get back to shore and we take up the

narrative again. Once more, the scene turns frenetic as St. Mark sketches a word-picture of frantic crowds hauling the sick, lame and injured all around the countryside on improvised stretchers, jostling to touch the fringe of Jesus' robes and be healed. Villages, cities, farms, open country - they hound Jesus everywhere, begging for help.

Like I said, it's a hodge-podge, a cut-and-paste series of vignettes from Jesus' earthly ministry. There are so many focal points that it's hard to actually focus on any one thing! My overall impression is one of fatigue, frenzy, and frantic action all colliding.

That impression might be the side-effect of a long, busy, and somewhat sad week here at the church. Pastor Rod was on vacation; David Frost and Anna Newcomer passed into Christ's peace; and though it wasn't exactly frenzied, the week surely was fatiguing and full of action for me. But isn't that life for most of us, much of the time? Especially during the school year, it can seem like an army of obligations, appointments, chores, deadlines, and schedules are encamped against us and bearing down fast. Add to that the usual minor crises like a flat tire, a stomach virus, a washing machine gone haywire, or a last-minute assignment. Then throw in the rarer emergency - a break-in, accident, or flood. Mix in chronic energy-sappers like caring for an aging parent, managing a financial meltdown, dealing with a long-term illness, or homework assignments from hell.

"Fatigue, frenzy, and frantic action" pretty well describes life for too many of us, too much of the time!

There's a lot of theological grist for the mill in today's gospel, but what I related to was how intensely practical that theological grist can be sometimes. Think about it. Jesus and his disciples were dealing with thousands of real peoples' down-to-earth concerns. Many were sick, or caring for the sick. Some were poor; most were at the end of their emotional or spiritual rope. They needed help; this rabbi offered concrete, measurable assistance. You can almost taste the urgency of their need. I'm sure the disciples figured they had to do as much as they could for as many as they could: isn't that what Jesus had taught?

But that's not entirely true, because here Jesus liberates the *truly* important from the tyranny of the merely urgent. "Come away by yourselves," he insists. Resting, eating, and - most importantly, praying - are crucial when life becomes frenetic. We know that on a physical level. We put an over-tired child in bed for a nap; we urge a friend to eat something during an all-night vigil in the ICU. We take a walk or play computer solitaire as a way of temporarily putting our minds in neutral while struggling with a difficult decision (or sermon!).

More importantly, though, we need spiritual refreshment and replenishment. We know how off-kilter we feel when we're rushed,

distracted, or worried. We start to act without even thinking about the consequences; after a while, our soul feels like it's unraveling and our whole self loses its footing, its direction, and its core. *Come away to be with God*, Jesus urges and invites us. What profit is there in gaining the whole world - or managing every crisis - while losing our souls?

But this isn't mere spiritual R and R - a welcome interruption, a vacation, a playtime for the spirit so that one can return to the "real world." Being rooted and grounded in *God is* the real world. Just as the most important thing parents can do for their children is to nourish their own bond as husband and wife, so it is here: Nourishing the union Christ has created in Baptism between himself and us, is the most important thing we can do as human beings who are also Jesus' disciples and workers in his Kingdom. From that union, everything else flows and finds its proper place, priority, and meaning.

Maybe you noticed what I did: when the crowds follow Jesus and the Twelve, he has compassion on them - *but doesn't immediately respond to their cries for physical healing*. He doesn't get sucked into the sense of urgency that has thrown their lives into a frenzy. Instead, he begins to free them, like his disciples, from the tyranny of the urgent. *He begins to teach them many things*. Was it parables, or something like the Sermon on the Mount? Mark doesn't provide details. Whatever Jesus said, it was meant to re-orient these hurting, harried,

helpless people; re-ground, re-direct, re-center them. Elsewhere in the Gospels we find what might be an apt summary: "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you." Or as someone famously remarked, "Lord, there ain't nothin' we can't handle together!"

As we'll see in the next few weeks, the next thing Jesus does is feed people. For one thing, nobody can learn on an empty stomach. For another, our bodies need refreshment and re-grounding, too. In a way, the crowds were given "comfort food" - simple, plain, nourishing fare. But Jesus will also teach them how *his* "comfort food for the body" intimately conveys the ultimate "comfort food for eternal life" - because what he's really feeding them is his own flesh for the life of the world. Since we'll be meditating on that together for the next month or so, I'll just leave you with this thought: Holy Communion is that "comfort food for the soul." *Especially* everything is going to hell in a hand-basket, come often to this place. Come here to be refreshed, and nourished, with God's dearest remedy. Come here for that ultimate comfort food; you have no idea how much you need it!

After this marvelous meal, once again Jesus urges his disciples to rest, to step back from the hustle-bustle; to pray. Martin Luther said that he spent an hour in prayer most mornings; but if he knew the day was going to be especially trying and difficult, he remained in prayer

for *two* hours. The worse things are going, the more urgently *we* need to be in God's presence, there to gain strength, perspective, and peace! And, no, I don't follow that advice very well, either.

At any rate, it's only after all of this - a repeated cycle of retreat, refreshment, hearing God's Word and receiving His Bread of life, and prayer - that the disciples are made ready to face the craziness, the demands, and the responsibilities of ordinary life and of life as Jesus' disciples. Notice that Jesus hasn't waved a magic wand to make all the people - or their problems - simply disappear. But at last there is a solid grounding from which to act. There's a solid core from which to reach out to others. There's an abiding peace that begins to make all the acts of compassion into genuine encounters with heavenly grace. There's a wellspring of nourishment that makes it possible to feed, and heal, teach, and serve, again and again - without burning out.

May our merciful, wise Savior teach us, as often as necessary, and until it sinks in and we actually listen and do as he invites us to. May he be the rest and refreshment, the solid ground and living bread, that makes it possible for us to live, serve, and love in this herky-jerky world, until he comes to make it, and us, and all things, new. Amen.