

Proper 11B “And Jesus said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while.” For many were coming and going and had no leisure even to eat.” Mk. 6.31

How hectic our lives have become! There is no time to do anything meaningful, it seems. People used to live close to their jobs, or if they didn't they commuted on the bus or train. Now we spend two hours a day stuck in traffic. The husband used to be the one who headed off to work each day, but now both husband and wife leave the house to support the family. So there are day care, and babysitters to keep the home that we are working so feverishly to own. Then there are the children's activities: ballet, baseball, soccer, football, youth group, homework. The list goes on and on. But the pace has quickened for the retired couple as well. The telephone is mobile now and won't stop ringing. The internet presents an endless stream of information that exhausts more than it informs so often. How many times have I heard someone say, “I wasn't this busy until I retired!” So Shakespeare's *Macbeth* describes our way of life so well: full of sound and fury but signifying nothing. In the same way the Psalmist wrote,

“It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep.” The modern American works harder and harder, takes fewer vacation days than his European neighbor and spends less time with his family. Our minds are so filled with the business of the day that we forget that it is God who pours out upon us the good things that we need.

It is with our way of life firmly in view that our Gospel lesson from St. Mark is so intriguing. Jesus had sent the 12 disciples out on their first mission trip two by two. They were to go throughout the region of Galilee proclaiming that the Kingdom of God had finally come in Jesus of Nazareth. They were to move quickly, leaving behind anything that would slow them down, and depend upon the generosity of those who received their message joyfully. Now they have returned and Jesus invites them to rest from their labors. But they cannot, because the crowds of people seeking Jesus were like sheep without a shepherd. And he had compassion on them. Jesus sympathized with his weary disciples and grieved over his people who were stricken by misfortune. He longed to bind up the broken and heal the wounded. Jesus is not a bloodless god, indifferent to the

needs of humanity. No, we find here today the God who has made all things come into the midst of his creation and shows compassion on those who have come to him for refuge.

So then, Jesus had compassion on his disciples. They had gone on a grueling mission trip, and had done it without Jesus. And what reception had they received? Mark does not give the account in detail, but only says that they returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. But we may be sure that they received the same reception as Jesus himself had. For Jesus warned them that, “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household. And again, ““Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.” They had gone out into a dangerous world proclaiming a dangerous message: There was a new king in town! Such a message would bring relief and joy to some, especially those who were weak and defeated. But to others, especially the powerful, this message would be a challenge to the status quo. The disciples

would have invited persecution. So we can be sure that the disciples had been glad to return to the company of their master. And he eagerly awaited their return to give them rest and to feed both their bodies and their souls. For even the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well found him to be an eternal supply of refreshment. She had come that day to draw water for her household and had returned filled with living water. She had come to feed the body that was thirsting and a soul that was parched by sin and the guilt of her adulterous affairs. But Jesus showed himself to be a life-giving spring of forgiveness and eternal life to those who will follow him. Oh, if this woman of a strange land and of wicked life could find rest and refreshment in Jesus, the disciples who were his constant companions were confident that their rest would be in him.

So Jesus had compassion on his disciples. But his care for his disciples was preempted by his compassion for the people. You all know the phrase, “When it rains it pours.” This is certainly true in Texas. There are many times that the clouds may promise rain, but then they blow on by with not a single drop. But when it finally gets to raining here, it seems as though the very sky is falling. The gutters fill

up and pour over the sides. The streets flood and cars are left abandoned. The thunder rolls and the power goes out across the city. Even so, the crowds were unrelenting as they followed Jesus across the countryside. He had performed remarkable miracles and even raised the dead. Now when he tries to take some time alone for his disciples the crowds persisted in their pursuit. Was he irritated by them? Did he lose his temper and shout at them to leave him alone? No, he had compassion upon them. He was the doctor that had come to heal the sick. He was the shepherd that had come to seek out the lost sheep. Indeed, they were like sheep without a shepherd. They were scattered without a leader who would guide them in peace. Their kings and their priests did not feed them but instead fed upon them. Ezekiel the prophet had warned this would be the case when he wrote, "Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because

there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts.”

Which shepherds were these? They were the spiritual men of the land. The priests and the Levites had not filled the bellies of the people with the life giving word of God. They had not instructed them in the ways of righteousness and justice. They had not pointed them toward everlasting life. They had abandoned them to work out their own destruction as they wandered like foolish sheep in their own sins. “All we like sheep have gone astray”, says Isaiah, “We have turned every one to his own way”. The people of Jesus’ day wandered in darkness not knowing where to go. And Jesus had compassion upon them. He would be their guide. He was the Good Shepherd. He would feed them in the wilderness. He would lead them beside still waters. He would restore their souls. He would lead them in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Oh, but he would do much, much more. For the remedy for poor sinful sheep who have gone wandering in their foolishness is as drastic and breathtaking as it is final and effective. The sheep shall not die. No, but the shepherd shall die in their place. Isaiah writes, “The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that

before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.” Here is a great mystery, dear ones! It is mysterious because it is the wrong way round. Sheep should die for the good of the shepherd. Ah, but this shepherd would have his sheep live forever and enjoy his green pastures for eternity. He would die so that they might live. He would give his life so that their sins might be cast off and that they be holy and blameless before Almighty God.

Our theme is the matchless compassion of Jesus Christ. For whether it be the road-weary disciples or the sin-weary crowds, Jesus the Son of God and the Son of Man provides the peace that passes all understanding. For Jesus did feed the 5,000 men plus their wives and children. Their bellies were full and 12 baskets of food were leftover from what Jesus had made from 5 barley loaves and 2 fish. Can anything be greater? Surely, for their bellies were empty the next day. What could be greater? Bread that lasts eternally. For Jesus said, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.” Jesus’ compassion is most clearly shown in that he himself has come into the world. He is the bread of life that was given for the life of the world. It is he that has

come down from Heaven, not to fill the belly but the soul. It is he that has come to do the will of the Father who sent him. And the will of the Father is to raise up all those who have believed and hoped in him on the last day.

Each Sunday the priest says the comfortable words in the Communion Service just after giving the Absolution of Sins. The first one is, “Come unto me all ye that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you.” It is Jesus himself who says these words. Oh, it is most surely the case that we here in America do not refuse ourselves even the smallest comforts. We have very little in common with the crowds of people who sought Jesus day after day. This is a blessing from God. But we may be sure that we suffer as much, if not more, the burden of weary souls. For if we do not know the weight of sin and temptation upon our souls then we are in grave danger. If the comforts of our bodies have deadened our consciences to the need we have in Christ then we are in jeopardy of eternal judgment. For it is only in Christ that we may gain access to the Father and forgiveness of sins. Instead, come in faith, hope and love to Jesus who had compassion on the disciples and the crowds. For he will have

compassion upon you. Throw your cares upon him. For he told the crowds, “All that the Father gives me will come to me; and him who comes to me I will not cast out.”