

TIME AFTER EPIPHANY [Proper 11, Lectionary 16] (B-RCL) – July 19, 2015

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 23; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
University Lutheran Church, Cambridge MA; Imogene A. Stulken

*Ecumenical Prayer Cycle:
Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico*

It's Sunday, July 19th, approximately 10:38 AM. / Detroit is also on Eastern Time – which means that, at this very moment, six of our young members, with Pastor Kari Jo and Harvard Divinity School student Caston Boyd, are worshiping during the closing Eucharist of the ELCA Youth Gathering. The context of their time together has been the Gospel of Mark. From the Welcome page of the Guidebook to the Youth Gathering, we read:

Mark told the story of God's good news in a particular time and place and for a specific community in the first century. We [the staff, planning team, and volunteers – we] hope that Mark's first-century effort will inspire you to consider how God is calling *you* individually and *us* collectively to share the good news of God in *this* time and place.

[http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/2015_Guidebook_Final.pdf?_ga=1.162575546.723602050.1425922540, accessed 7.8.2015, emphases added] //

A portion of Mark's story of God's good news is found in our Gospel for today in chapter 6. // But first a bit of lead-in to our story from near the beginning of this chapter: As we heard in the Gospel reading two weeks ago – Jesus called the twelve, gave them “authority over the unclean spirits,” [Mark 6: 7c] and sent them out two by two. -- I've always appreciated the fact that each of them had a companion for the journey; they didn't have to do this work alone. However, Jesus ordered the disciples “to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts”; they could wear sandals, but they were allowed only one tunic.

— Now, I'm assuming that the youth took more apparel with them to Detroit than just their red "UniLu Youth" t-shirts. And I'm guessing they may have taken one or two other items as well. / I don't know about you, but I confess that *I* would certainly find it challenging to follow Jesus' order to take nothing for the journey! – no photos of loved ones, no journal for reflecting on my experiences, no changes of clothing for all possible weather conditions, and what would *I* do without *Kleenex tissues*!?! /

And how could I trust that *somewhere* my companion and I would find *someone* so willing to listen to the news that we brought that we would be housed and fed?!? //

Jesus makes no mention of an outer garment, so it may not have been allowed on the disciples' journey. Such a garment could have served as a cloak by day and a blanket by night. It would have had *fringe* – a mandated part of the clothing for Jewish males. [Numbers 15:38-39; Deuteronomy 22:12; Matthew 23:5] (This fringe ended in a tassel sewn on at the four corners of the garment. [George Arthur Buttrick, dictionary editor, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, Volume 2:E-J (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), "Fringe", p. 325]. These tassels served as reminders of God's commandments.) //

Yet the twelve do go out – as prophetic and itinerant evangelists, living on the margins (or *fringes*) of society, knowing that their message will not always be well-received. [Mark 6:31b] With not even bread for the journey, they will need to rely solely on the hospitality and "kindness of strangers, and on faith that Jesus knows what he is talking about." [Mark G. Vitalis Hoffman, "Commentary on Mark 6:1-13," https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=339, accessed 7.15.2015]

So now: Try to picture the scene as today's Gospel narrative opens: "The apostles [gather] around Jesus, and [tell] him all that they [have] done and taught." [Mark 6:30, NRSV] There is a sense of urgency in Mark's Gospel: I wonder if this same urgency can be heard in the disciples' words as they tell about confronting the power of evil – for they have "cast out many demons". Perhaps they all begin to talk at once, maybe even gesticulating as they speak – for they have summoned

their hearers to repent; that is, not just to be sorry for past deeds, but to actually change their minds and hearts. Maybe the disciples are all eager to share their experiences of bringing healing – for they have “anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.” [Mark 6:13. NRSV] //

All this they share with Jesus. But so busy are they – with so many people coming and going, that they don’t even have time to eat!! / How many of us at some point in our lives could relate to that? When have we been so busy – with work or school or home or family or church or friends or all of the above – that we became “human doings” rather than “human beings”? [“Daily Discipleship: Sunday, July 17-23 (B) – Mark 6:30-34; 53-56, p. 2] What if we imagined Jesus saying to *us*, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”? [Mark 6:31b] If it really isn’t possible to go off somewhere by yourself, perhaps the “deserted place” could even be in a vehicle while commuting – with radio and electronic devices switched off. Or maybe the “deserted place” could be a walk in the neighborhood – again while being “unwired.” Or the “resting a while” might be intentionally sitting, meditating, or doing yoga for even five to ten minutes, or it might be taking a nap. /

So: Jesus and the disciples go by boat to this deserted place. Perhaps they find a moment’s respite while on the water, but they certainly do not find it on land! When they arrive at this so-called “deserted place” [Mark 6:35], they are greeted by a great crowd: Many people “from all the towns” have seen them leave and dashed there on foot, arriving ahead of them. We *don’t* know whether or not Jesus (or at least the *disciples*) utter a sigh upon seeing the crowd, but we *do* know that Jesus’ response is one of compassion. This compassion – the Greek word here is a form of the word *σπλαγχνιζομαι* (*splagchnizomai*) – this compassion is a deep, felt-in-the-pit-of-the-stomach empathy; it is a loving and merciful concern. /

What, then, is Jesus’ response to these people who are sheep without a shepherd? We might anticipate that Jesus would here show compassion by, for example, healing the sick. But that isn’t what happens next. Instead, Jesus begins “to teach them many things.” [Mark 6:34] // Mark G. Vitalis Hoffman is Associate Professor of Biblical

Studies at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg. In his commentary on this text he writes:

Okay, it's true, my calling is to be a teacher in the Church, so you can see why I like this verse! But it really is a remarkable way of thinking about ministry. In fact, I've worked with Christian educators to help them understand education as an expression of compassionate evangelism.

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=375, accessed 7.7.2015] //

And then, in the section that is omitted from today's Gospel: The crowd lingers late into the day to hear Jesus' teaching, which must have indeed fed their deep spiritual hunger and longing. When the hour grows late, however, the disciples become aware of another kind of hunger – the physical kind. At this point, Jesus' compassion does indeed extend also to the care of the body, where, with only five loaves and two fish, Jesus feeds a multitude of 5000 men (and an *untold* number of women and children). Jesus *acts* as well as teaches, becoming for the crowd their Good Shepherd. The disciples are then sent in the boat to the other side, while Jesus dismisses the crowd. And then there's this wonderful verse: "After saying farewell to them, [Jesus] went up on the mountain to pray." [Mark 6:46] Not just giving them a dismissive nod or wave, Jesus takes time to say farewell to the crowd – so there's hospitality in the leaving, too. Only then does Jesus go alone to pray.

So, the disciples get in the boat; they are out to sea all night. Toward early morning, Jesus comes toward them walking on the water, calms the storm that has come up, and gets into the boat.

All of which brings us to the last section of today's reading. Jesus and the disciples cross over and moor the boat. And then – did you notice? – It is when they get *out* of the boat that the people *at once* recognize Jesus. As someone has commented: "[W]hat does that mean to us as to where we need to be in order that Christ is seen in us and in our ministry and mission? It would appear that there is a lesson here about taking [the Gospel witness] to the road . . . – proclaiming in life

and action that God's love has come to turn the world right-side up and that the Kingdom of God is here for us to live in as makers of peace and justice." [Comment on Hoffman's commentary

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=375] //

Wherever Jesus goes, people bring the sick on mats and lay them in the marketplaces [Mark 6:55, 56]. These mats were actually "mattresses commonly used by the poor."

[http://www.lectionary.org/EXEG_Engl_WEB/NT/02-Mark-WEB/Mark%2006.30-34,%2053-56.htm, accessed 7.10.2015] The marketplace was a central gathering space; it was a public place, both for political activities and commercial enterprises. Theologian Elizabeth Webb, in her commentary on this passage, notes:

By healing the sick, the weakest and most vulnerable members of a community, in this space, Jesus is subverting the economy of this world through the very inauguration of God's kingdom economy. While the marketplaces of the world belong to the rich and powerful, in the kingdom of God this most political and commercial of spaces is occupied by those with the least.

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2540, accessed 7.8.2015] //

The last verse of our text illustrates for me the role of the community in interceding, advocating, and acting on behalf of others: Disregarding any inconvenience to themselves, the people rush about bringing the sick to wherever Jesus is; and did you catch this?: They *beg* Jesus to allow those they have brought to touch even the *fringe* of Jesus' garment. // I am reminded here of the hymn, "O Christ, the Healer, We Have Come / to pray for health, to plead for friends. / How can we fail to be restored / when reached by love that never ends?" [Fred Pratt Green, *ELW* 610:1] // For whom are we the advocates? On whose behalf do we beg Jesus for healing? Alternatively: Who has carried *us* to Jesus in faith when we weren't able to travel by our own efforts? Who is praying, pleading for us? //

The movement of the sick, the vulnerable, was from the fringes to the center where they found healing – just by touching even the fringe of Jesus’ cloak. [Mark 6:56c]

It has been suggested that the verb “to touch” can mean “to modify or change by touching”; it is “touching that *influences*”; it is touching *someone* (or *something*) “in a way that *alters* (*changes, modifies*) them”; it is “*impact-touching*.” [“680.

haptomai,” <http://biblehub.com/greek/680.htm>, accessed 7.6.15] . . . // But change – even if it comes with healing – can be scary. If holding on to Jesus’ garment means that I will be changed – and, therefore, challenged – in some fundamental way, I might just choose to stay the way I am . . . / But some twenty-first century questions remain: *From* what do we need to be healed? *For* what do we need changing? In what ways might this community of faith need altering?

One obvious example of where the *nation* needs Jesus’ healing transformation is in regard to the sin of racism and the toxicity of white privilege. As I looked at the Web site for the ELCA Youth Gathering in Detroit, I was pleased to note that one of yesterday’s scheduled speakers was Marian Wright Edelman. She is the founder and President of the Children’s Defense Fund. [I have posted four of her relatively recent *Child Watch* Columns on the bulletin board; I invite you to take a look at them.] In her June 5th Column, she says:

If our communities have poor, homeless, and hungry children and families and we volunteer at homeless shelters or donate to food pantries and think we’ve done our part, we are only half right. We have done *an* important part. But we are not finished if we are not also fighting to prevent and eliminate the violence of joblessness, poor education, poverty, and hunger and the inequalities and injustices that feed and accompany them and unjust systems that create them. [“Charity Is Not a Substitute for Justice,” June 5, 2015; Marian Wright Edelman cdfinfo@childrensdefense.org] //

All who touched the fringe of Jesus’ cloak were healed. Such is the power of God’s compassion that it can be found in even the fringe of a garment. The apostle Paul, writing to the Galatians, says: “As many of

you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” [Galatians 3:27, NRSV] And from Julian of Norwich: “Our good Lord is our clothing that, for love, wraps us up and winds us about, embracing us, all beclosing us and hanging about us, for tender love.” [*Revelations of Divine Love*, as cited in Gail Ramshaw, “Clothing,” *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, © 2002 Augsburg Fortress, p. 93.] //

I look forward to when Neil and August and Grace and Solvay and Alice and Linnea get out of the Detroit boat, coming ashore at Cambridge. I can imagine their gathering around us, eagerly sharing all that they did and all that they were taught. I anticipate being fed and nourished – as well as challenged – as they teach *us*. May we all be inspired by *impact-teaching* “to consider how God is calling [us] individually and . . . collectively [too] to share the good news of God in this time and place.” And may we all be so changed by *impact-touching* that God’s power displayed in Jesus – to feed the hungry, heal the sick, turn things right-side up, and bring life from death – may work through us in our own contexts. Clothed in the tunic of Christ’s compassion, fed by God’s Word and fed again at the table, may we be empowered to join the struggle, and labor with others toward the healing that we – and our nation – and this world – so desperately need.