

“A Picture of the Church”

Mark 6:30-44

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost 2021; July 18, 2021

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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Mark’s gospel tells us today of Christ’s feeding the five thousand with five loaves of bread and two fish.

The twelve disciples, who are called apostles, got back together with Jesus. They returned after the missionary journey Jesus sent them on. They tell Jesus everything they had done and taught (Mark 6:30). Jesus had specifically chosen and called the twelve and sent them out in pairs. He authorized them to preach the kingdom of God. He gave them authority over unclean spirits (Mark 6:7).

When they got back, there were so many people coming and going that they didn’t even have time to eat. So Jesus tells them to come away to a desolate place and rest for a while (Mark 6:31).

So they got into a boat and started to cross the Sea of Galilee to find that desolate place.

Many of the people saw them get into the boat. They ran ahead of them on foot. They could watch the boat from the hills above the Sea. They got to the place ahead of Jesus and the twelve. When Jesus got there, a large crowd was waiting for Him.

The people were pursuing Jesus, seeking Him. He was their focus. They left many things behind in Capernaum or the other villages in the vicinity, if only for a short time, as they were single mindedly focused on Jesus.

Jesus climbs out of the boat onto the shore. He sees the crowd that has gathered. He has compassion on them because they are like sheep without a shepherd. So what does He do? He begins to teach them. He teaches them the word of God.

This reference to Jesus seeing the people as sheep without a shepherd can give us opportunity to talk about the Old Testament reading from the prophet Jeremiah for a moment. Jeremiah starts out by saying “woe to the shepherds” (Jer. 23:1). To understand what is going on there, we need to ask two questions: who the shepherds were and what they did.

Reading the first 23 chapters of Jeremiah and all the way through chapter 23 will provide a full picture. We can’t do that here. I would encourage you to do that on your own this week. But just looking at chapter 23 can give us a glimpse of what was going on.

In chapter 23, verse 11, Jeremiah says, “Both prophet and priest are ungodly; even in my house I have found their evil” (Jer. 23:11). So the shepherds were the priests and prophets. They were ungodly. We could also add to this list their kings and the scribes and leaders of the people.

Jeremiah tells us what they did. In verse 15 it says “[F]rom the prophets of Jerusalem ungodliness has gone out into all the land” (Jer. 23:11). In verse 16 it says the prophets “speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. They say continually to those who despise the word the LORD, ‘It shall be well with you;’ and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you’” (Jer. 23:16-17). Yet, disaster is precisely what the LORD had told Jeremiah was coming.

The people of Israel had been adopting the religion and idols and ways of the people around them. The prophets, however, were speaking peace to them. “Peace, peace! When there is no peace” (Jer. 8:11). Or, we would say today: it’s okay, when it’s not okay.

The prophets Jeremiah was talking about were false prophets. In verses 21 and 22 it says,

“I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their deeds” (Jer. 23:21-22).

What the priests and prophets did was fail to teach God’s word to the people. The prophets caused the people to forget the name of the LORD. This is why the LORD pronounces woe to them. This is why the shepherds have destroyed and scattered the sheep (Jer. 23:1).

Jeremiah promises that a man shall come. He shall be a Branch from the family tree of King David. He will be King and lead the people in the truth of God’s word. He will lead them back to God. He will be called: The LORD is our righteousness (Jer. 23:6).

And now they are gathered around Him, Yahweh in the flesh, the Son of David, come to be their shepherd, as Yahweh had promised through Jeremiah. And they look around at those gathered there as well, identified by the Name, and find the family of God. Yahweh in the flesh gathering His people.

So He was there when Jesus stepped onto the shore. He is here with us according to His word of promise (Mat. 18:20; Mat. 28:20).

Jesus had compassion for the people. So He taught them God’s word. And they heard and listened, even as it corrected and convicted them; even as it absolved and consoled them. They heard the whole counsel of God in humility and faith.

But there is more. The twelve say to Jesus, “It is getting late. These people need to get something to eat. Tell them to go away into the surrounding countryside and villages nearby to get themselves something to eat.”

Jesus says to them, “You give them something to eat” (Mark 6:37).

It was one of those jaw-dropping moments. They stand there dumbfounded. They say, “Jesus, it would cost at least 200 denarii to buy enough food for these people. How do you expect us to do that?” (Mark 6:37).

A denarii was a day’s wage for a laborer. They are talking about more than half a year’s worth of work. Imagine Jesus telling us to take half of our income this year to buy food for a crowd of 5000 to 10,000 people.

Jesus says, “Okay. So what do you have? Check it out. Take an inventory” (Mark 6:38).

They come back. “We have five loaves of bread and two fish,” they say.

Then Jesus speaks to the people. He issues a command that they should sit down on the green grass in groups. They do so.

Jesus took the loaves and the fish. He looked up to heaven to acknowledge the Father who sent Him. He blessed the loaves and the fish. He multiplied them. He gave the bread and fish to His disciples to give to the people to eat. Everyone ate and was satisfied (Mark 6:41-42).

The people did not receive the bread and the loaves directly from Jesus’s hand. They received them from the hand of His called servants.

We see here a picture of the church. The people are gathered around Jesus; gathered as He has promised to be with them. He teaches them God’s word. He feeds them with bread through His servants. It is the teaching of God’s word and the hearing and listening to it that makes them God’s people. It is not wherever they came from that does so. It is not honor and status in this world. Jesus is our righteousness.

And they are focused on Jesus for His own sake. Jesus is the goal, the purpose, the thing itself. It is as the Apostle Paul says, “He Himself is our peace. We have been brought near to God by His blood. In Him we have access to the Father, which is what the church longs for: to be

at peace with God (Eph. 2:14-18).

So we gather around His word and His bread, like the people did that day. The word spoken that day was from Jesus's Himself. The bread on that day was not the bread of Holy Communion. Not on that day, in the hills above the Sea of Galilee. Yet Jesus feeding them that day teaches us that Jesus gives word and bread, both together and inseparable. He feeds in two ways: with word and with the bread.

The word He speaks today and feeds us on is that spoken by the apostles and prophets, their word now written and peached and taught, Christ Himself being the cornerstone (Eph. 2:20).

The bread by which He feeds us here is Holy Communion, the bread that is His body. This is the body sacrificed by Him to make us one body with Him together. He also gives us wine, in which He gives His shed blood, the blood that makes us a people holy unto Himself and to God, through the forgiveness of sins (Eph. 1:7). He feeds us with His holy meal, in a mystery.

And so we have a picture of the church on earth. Christ's people gathered where Christ is present to be fed by Christ and to know Christ. To know Christ as the end and the goal. Christ is not a means to some other end. Christ is the end itself, by which we come to the Father.

May God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ gather us as Christ's people around His word and sacrament always, until that day when our faith gives way to glorious sight, and we behold Him in everlasting peace and joy with the Father in the Spirit. Amen.