

Ephesians 2:11-22
mark 6:30-34, 53-56
July 21, 2024

Joined Together

I sometimes look for a story to tell in the hopes that it might help drive home something of the essence of the gospel message. Sometimes there is one ready at hand that seems to fit. And now after thirty years of preaching with occasional stories I have forgotten which ones I have told to which congregations.

I believe that I must be condemned to become one of those old story-tellers who keeps telling the same stories over-and-over to the same hearers, who roll their eyes and wonder how to politely slip away, even if only in their own thoughts.

I sometimes tell the stories of others and use them for my own purposes, even if my purposes turn out to bear little or no resemblance to the intentions of the original story-teller. I am thinking of an incident that occurred on the bus after the first of the high school cross country races in which I participated. Forgive me if I have told it before.

For some reason, when I was in school (I confess I don't know how it is today), cross country was on the cheerleader spectrum. They always went to football and basketball games and wrestling meets without asking if they were wanted, and nothing else, except occasional appearances at cross country races.

So after that race they sent their faculty sponsor to ask us if we wanted them to come to our meets. I have to admit that there was a history, one that I am not telling because it would take up too much time. But we knew the meaning of their question. They did not want to come and wanted our permission.

There was going to be a vote, but the captain of the team, who was a part of the aforementioned history, gave the answer that carried the day. I feel guilty for telling it because it makes him out to be a villain, which is not the case, but he said, "we don't want them." That was it. They never came back.

The accounts given in the Gospel of Mark about the Feeding of the 5000 and Jesus Walking on the Water are sandwiched, if you will, between the two summary statements about the early days of the ministry of Jesus, when he was highly sought after and very popular.

There are several crossings of the Sea of Galilee in Mark's version of things, and in this case Jesus and his disciples cross the lake to get away from the crowd for a little down time. They were always bumping into people on these journeys, sometimes even Gentiles were encountered. Either way, instead of finding solitude, they found people seeking him out.

These people were not there for a political convention or an athletic or entertainment festival or even for a vacation, but because they had need, and thought that Jesus could help them.

In spite of the intention to get some rest, Jesus found himself confronted with circumstances from which he could not in good conscience turn away. We are told that when he saw the people, he had compassion on them, which is to say that he *felt* deeply for them, because they were like, “sheep without a shepherd.”

While there, he taught them and fed them miraculously, then afterward he dismissed the crowd and sent his companions back across the lake while he stayed behind and sneaked away for a brief mountain prayer retreat. Later he caught up with them by walking across the lake on the water.

As soon as they reached the other side, he ran into a crowd of people and they brought the sick, and they begged him to let them touch his clothing, even just the hem of this cloak. Those that did were healed.

It is noticeable, in this artificial rendering, that the focus of these readings is on the statements before and after the miracles, and not on the miracles themselves.

We learn that Jesus did not do miracles to show off, or just for their own sake, because he could, he seemed to be spending most of his time trying to get away. We learn that the people that Jesus taught and fed and healed lived in hard circumstances, some of their own doing perhaps, but they were also victims of circumstances beyond their control, the results of decisions made by others, maybe even made before they were born, or by leaders that disregarded them.

People can be pretty good at mutual rejection and some pay a heavier price for it than others.

Whatever else, they were not out there on holiday, but they had in some way been *rejected*. Might it be true that the world is always like this? That the world, the people in it, in its separation from God, is rejected, its people experience that rejection in the depths of their souls?

In the end there are no people that haven't been rejected or lost their way, or both and even all these hundreds of years later we find similar situations. Earthly life remains troubled, and the trouble, in addition to being a description of real-life challenges, has become for us a metaphor of the human condition.

It does not take a prophet from an esoteric religious tradition to see that we are still like sheep without a shepherd, even those of us who have managed to make our way pretty well in the world.

When God looks at *us*, like Jesus did all those people, he also sees a people bumbling along. “We all like sheep have gone astray,” comes from the prophet Isaiah several hundred years before even Jesus. This judgement, however it is stated; that all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory; or that the accomplishments of humanity are not really all that they are cracked up to be; is a bit of an insult to human pride, if we decide to take it that way.

And, these observations *can* also be corrupted in such a way as to make them harmful, by those who wield them as blunt instruments instead of gracious reminders of universal truth. Woe to the preacher who does not speak of the human condition, and does not talk about sin, for it is a crucial part of the message, but never as a blunt instrument, rather always as a reminder of universal truth. For Jesus, then and now, they are occasions for mercy and compassion.

And God's compassion and mercy has been expressed in Jesus Christ, who *is* God stepping into the breach for us. The compassion of Jesus for the crowd of people without a shepherd also can be described in other ways, and this what the voice of Paul does for us in the 2nd Chapter of Ephesians.

Paul addresses the great social division of his day, the dividing line between Jew and Gentile. From the Jewish perspective, the Gentiles had not been chosen by God, thus were godforsaken and beyond hope. From the Roman perspective, the Jewish people were an odd sect that sometimes threatened the order and peace of the realm, and had to be tolerated at best. "No, we does really want you around." "No we don't really want to be around you."

Paul says to the Gentiles in the church, that they were cut off, separated from God's family, but now in Christ Jesus have been brought near . . . In Christ, we are all . . . one. We are no longer foreign aliens, but fellow citizens. We are a part of each other's support

systems. Perhaps we might look for ways to say yes to each other.

"Built on the foundation of the apostles *and* prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone . . . the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And . . . in Whom, you both are being built together to become a dwelling in which *God lives by his Spirit.*"

Let us take this message as *good news*, for ourselves and for others, for the ones who exclude and reject us and for the one we exclude and reject. The grand vision of the Christian faith is the overcoming of all that hinders and divides; it is a vision of reconciliation and unity. Admittedly, that grand vision has been only partially realized, and is only partially realized among us.

Thankfully, it is not contingent upon our compassion but on Christ's, not on our capacity for reconciliation but God's; not on human understanding but divine wisdom. It is our task, to believe this message. We are not called to know but to believe, not merely to give lip service to faith, but to actually believe in God's mercy and acceptance, in Christ Jesus, crucified and raised, the answer is yes.

It was one of many subtle ways human beings have of saying, "no" to each other. Of course we want you to come. That is good, because wild horses couldn't keep us away.

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