

## Discipleship in the Lectionary – 07/18/2021



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

**Eighth Sunday After Pentecost**

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, July 18th

**Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**

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### **A people without a shepherd**

This week's Gospel lection is a continuation from the death of John the Baptist. The twelve who were sent out on mission return. Jesus has compassion on them and takes them off to a desolate place to rest but the crowds are waiting for them. Jesus has compassion on the crowds – like sheep without a shepherd – and feeds them with teaching. The lectionary picks up again when Jesus and His disciples arrive in Gennesaret where they travel about this region and heal many. The underlying theme appears to be crowds in need - a people without a shepherd.

#### Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 Commentary

The text continues from the death of John the Baptist (6:14-29) with the return of the twelve from their missionary journeys. They withdraw by boat to a desolate place, but the crowds anticipated where they were heading and got there on foot ahead of them (30-34). The text selection then omits the feeding for the five thousand (35-44) and when Jesus walks on the water (45-52). The text selection concludes with Jesus healing the sick in Gennesaret (53-56).

*<sup>30</sup> The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. <sup>31</sup> And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.*

After Jesus was rejected in His hometown of Nazareth (6:1-6), Jesus commissioned the twelve to undergo a specific ministry as part of their continued spiritual development (7-13). The work of the twelve bore fruit (v.13), and the name of Jesus became known, even by Herod (v.14). Now the apostles (sent ones) return and report on their experiences. Jesus and His disciples appear to be surrounded by crowds to the point they could not rest or even eat without interruption. Recognizing how His disciples were in much need of rest after their mission, Jesus' solution was to withdraw to a desolate place (*erēmos* – uninhabited).

*<sup>32</sup> And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. <sup>33</sup> Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. <sup>34</sup> When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.*

The best method to withdraw from the crowds without them following was by boat. However, people along the shoreline recognized them and saw the direction they were heading. When Jesus and His disciples arrived, they

saw a great crowd was already on the shore. Rather than express anger or frustrated because the purpose of their journey had been negated, Jesus expressed compassion. The expression “*like sheep without a shepherd*” is a direct reference Numbers 27:17 where Moses prays to God for a leader to replace him so that “*the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep that have no shepherd.*” It is also a reference to Ezekiel 34:4-6 where Ezekiel prophesies against the shepherds of Israel. These false shepherds tended to their own needs and ruled over the people harshly and thus the sheep became scattered. While the people may have looked like sheep – wandering about aimlessly like sheep without a shepherd, the imagery is clearly a reference to the failure of the current religious leaders of Israel. This is emphasized in Jesus’ response: “*And he began to teach them many things*” (v. 34b). Jesus, of course, is the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-21).

<sup>53</sup> *When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored to the shore.*

After the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus made His disciples get in the boat by themselves and head off to Bethsaida on the other side of the Sea of Galilee (v.45). During the storm there must have been a northeasterly wind that caused them to drift southwest and head in the direction of Gennesaret.

<sup>54</sup> *And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognized him* <sup>55</sup> *and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was.* <sup>56</sup> *And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well.*

Gennesaret was only about 3 miles further down the shore from Capernaum. At this point in His ministry, Jesus is well known in Galilee. Jesus went about the whole region where people came out in droves. Touching the fringe of His garment alludes back to the healing of the unnamed women in 5:25-34. The reference to the fringe of Jesus’ garment perhaps suggests Jesus is wearing orthodox clothing with tassels (Numbers 15:37-41).

### Reflection

Even though sparse in details, this lectionary text provides further insights into what Jesus did to train and develop His disciples – specifically the twelve that He sent out as apostles. Once they return from their mission, Jesus conducts what today is referred to as a debrief session to further drive home the learning. Jesus also recognizes how His returning twelve need rest and restoration. He decides to withdraw into the wilderness/uninhabited place. Here Jesus is teaching them the rhythm He uses throughout His ministry of engaging in mission, withdrawing into the wilderness for rest and renewal by spending time alone with the Father through prayer, then reengaging with the crowds. This is a lesson we should apply to our lives too.

The underlying theme across the text in this lection appears to be the crowds. Jesus is confronted with the crowds as the twelve returned. They withdraw only to find the crowds waiting and once they reach shore after the storm, they find crowds coming out everywhere they go. Jesus continues to show compassion. He describes them as sheep without a shepherd. While there are physical dimensions to this description (the need for feeding and healing), there are also important spiritual dimensions – the need for teaching. The spiritual leaders of Israel have failed the people.

In our day, our state religion is humanism – the worship of the self. This has resulted in great numbers of the lost, scattered like sheep without a shepherd. Where do they flock – the church? Not based on Pew data. The lost are attracted to places where the Gospel is diluted to become acceptable to humanism, or to places that preach a heretical gospel that promises health and prosperity, or to inwardly turned churches emphasizing legalistic orthodoxy of the head but not orthopraxy of the heart. Religious leaders are failing the people again.