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Mark 6:30-44

TAKING INVENTORY

I was reminded recently when Tim and I went to Chicago to help our college-aged son pack up his apartment of what happens when you move. When you undertake a move stuff just mushrooms out from closets and drawers and cupboards. And there, surrounded by all your things, you have an opportunity to take inventory of what you have. You discover how much more you had than you thought you did! Sometimes you discover things you had forgotten about, maybe even some treasured items you hadn't seen in a while. And you have the opportunity to assess all your possessions and to decide what is valuable to you, what is useful to you, and what is not.

Today's scripture reading from Mark offers us an opportunity to take inventory of our lives, and to review what we have and how we might use it. And as usual, Jesus leads the way by showing us how it is done. The passage we read today includes the story of the miraculous feeding of the 5,000, the story of how Jesus performed a miracle by feeding so many people with the most meager of resources—just 5 loaves and 2 fish. But something important happens before this miracle that is worth our attention.

Before this miracle occurs, Jesus and his disciples decide to find a quiet place far from the crowds in order to take some much needed R and R. But the crowds get word of where they are going and they rush ahead to the very place Jesus and his disciples were headed. Instead of getting angry, Jesus saw the great crowd and “he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” Sheep without a shepherd are lost. Sheep without a shepherd stray into dangerous places. Sheep without a shepherd are vulnerable. Jesus saw how lost the

people were and how desperate they were to discover meaning in their lives. He saw how they exhausted themselves running after all sorts of things—as we do today. We rush to the shopping malls to make it in time for that really big sale. We pack our children’s lives full to the brim with enriching activities. We eat in our cars because we are too busy to plan a meal and sit and nurture meaningful relationships. We rush to get ahead at work in order to make more money and become more successful.

Jesus saw these people, like he sees us, running to find meaning, and he had compassion for them. Not judgment but compassion. They were lost. Sheep without a shepherd. People who didn’t know where to go. They were hungry and they were lost.

And so Jesus takes what he has, he takes this great well of compassion, and he uses it. He does something *with* this compassion. First he teaches the people. The gospel writer Mark tells us that Jesus “began to teach them many things.” We know from other stories the kinds of things Jesus taught people so we can imagine what Jesus might have taught the crowds here in our story today. Maybe about the love of God. Or maybe about forgiving one another. Or maybe about walking God’s way of justice and mercy for the vulnerable. Or maybe going the extra mile or loving one’s enemies. Or maybe about finding our true treasure in the kingdom of God. What Jesus said to those crowds is not known but we do know that Jesus took his compassion and used it to teach the people something of worth and value. He fed their souls.

And then next, he fed their bodies. It becomes late in the day. The people are hungry. And so Jesus performs this miracle where he feeds all 5,000 with just 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. Jesus’ uses his compassion to feed the people in body and in soul.

There is a very interesting connection that the gospel writer of Mark makes between this story and with the 23rd Psalm, which we also read today. The linking of these two texts is not an

accident, because the gospel writer of Mark also links these two together. As you may recall, Psalm 23 begins with, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Mark has already introduced the idea of the shepherd when he tells us that Jesus had compassion for the crowds because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Now we have “shepherd on the brain.”

And then Mark goes on to make allusions to Psalm 23 so that we will think of Jesus as being the good shepherd of Psalm 23. Psalm 23 tells us that the shepherd “makes me lie down in green pastures.” Then Mark writes in our story today that Jesus had the crowds sit down on the green grass. That detail about the “green” grass is not thrown in there for no reason. It is there to make us think about Psalm 23 and the good shepherd.

Psalm 23 speaks about the shepherd’s goodness which is so abundant that “my cup overflows.” In Mark’s feeding story, there is so much abundance that after feeding the 5,000, there are enough leftovers to fill twelve baskets. Again, overflowing abundance. Mark is trying to make the connection: Jesus *is* the compassionate good shepherd. And Jesus will use this compassion like a loving shepherd to feed us in body and in spirit.

But before Jesus fed the crowds, he did something first. First Jesus tells his *disciples* to feed the crowds. When the disciples come to him and tell him that the crowds of people were getting hungry, Jesus said to them, “*You* give them something to eat.” And when the disciples were flabbergasted at the impossibility of the task in front of them—how they could possibly feed 5,000 people—Jesus showed them how it is done. He asked them, what do you have on hand? And they answered, five loaves of bread and two fish. And Jesus took these and performed a miracle.

Our attention in this story could be focused exclusively on the miracle. But the miracle includes an important message. Jesus tells his followers, Jesus tells us, *you* give them something

to eat. *You* feed the hungry. *You* share what you have. *You* care for the poor. *You* give second chances. *You* stand up for the powerless. *You* comfort the grieving. *You* do it.

The story invites us to take what we have and to use it. It may not seem like much—like 5 loaves and 2 fish—but with the power and love and presence of Christ, it can indeed become very much.

First it begins with compassion. That is where the miracle began for Jesus. It began with his compassion. But it didn't just remain a feeling he had in his heart. Instead, his compassion moved him to action.

And our compassion then moves us to take inventory of what we have and to use what we have for God's purposes.

And so my question to you is, what do you have? Don't tell me you have nothing. Because we know what God can do with even 5 loaves and 2 fish. What do you have? Do you have a heart for children or for animals? Then you have something! Do you have money in the bank? Do you have skills for teaching or tutoring? Do you have an extra coat or sweater? Do you have outrage when hearing a story about an injustice? That's having something! Do you have the ability to cook? Do you have an education and the ability to write? What do you have?

Jesus tells us to use what we have. We don't have to perform a miracle. We can leave that up to Jesus. But Jesus tells us to begin by using what we have.

Maybe it is time we took inventory of what we have. Maybe it's time for you and for me to pull out from our hearts and our minds and our closets and our cupboards all the things we have that we have forgotten about, all the treasures we maybe didn't ever think were treasures. Let's take inventory of what we have in our hearts, in our homes, in our minds, and in our hands,

and use them with compassion on behalf of the good shepherd. To use what we have trusting that, in the hands of the good shepherd, what we offer will overflow in abundance.