

Jesus Provides Spiritual Refreshment

Mark 6:30-34

by Michael G. Lilienthal

My dear fellow workers sent out by Christ,

No doubt you are familiar with the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, when Jesus took five loaves of bread and two fish, blessed them, broke them, and had the apostles hand them out to the people. Five thousand were fed, and there were twelve baskets full of the leftovers. This is a fantastic miracle demonstrating Jesus' godly power, and also his compassionate care of those who are in need. But we'll read more on that miracle next week. This week, in our five short verses from Mark's Gospel, we see what occupied Jesus immediately prior to this miracle. We see Jesus here concerned primarily, not with bodily needs, but with spiritual needs. Jesus recognizes the gap in our human souls. Living in a sinful world, we'll always have downs that match our ups, and be bombarded with emotional and spiritual exhaustion and hunger. Jesus recognizes this, himself having a human soul surrounded by the brokenness of a sinful world, so he provides spiritual refreshment.

I. To Encourage His Undershepherds

Last week we read that Jesus "called the twelve and began to send them out two by two" (Mark 6:7). The mission they were given, we read, they began to do: "So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them" (Mark 6:12-13). Now, in what we read today, these twelve return. It is significant, too, that we see here the first

place in Mark's Gospel where these twelve disciples of Jesus are called "apostles."

"Apostle" means literally one who is sent out. Since Jesus had sent them out, they could now officially claim this title.

They "returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught." Just picture their perspective. They had performed miracles! And not only that, but they had also proclaimed the Gospel message; certainly there would have been doors slammed in their faces, and Jesus had warned them about that, but there would also have been many who heard the message they proclaimed with joy and wonder.

I myself have experienced a little bit of this excitement firsthand. Serving as Vicar, I spent a year "sent out" away from those who had taught me, proclaiming the message of repentance and the Gospel of salvation. There were indeed difficult moments, times when what I said was rejected and I was turned away disappointed. But there were also plenty of times when I could see the Gospel light up a person's life, bring them joy and peace as they realized that they were forgiven and saved. So at the end of my vicarage I returned to my teachers and to my fellow seminarians, men who would themselves soon embark on a mission such as mine, and I made my report.

As a pastor, I'll have numerous other opportunities to make similar reports. There are periodic Winkels, or small circuit pastor's conferences, when the ELS pastors in the area gather and talk about our experiences, telling one another what we've done, and receiving advice and encouragement as we return to our duties. There's an annual Synod Convention, when all the clergy of the ELS gather together in Mankato, partially to coordinate synod-wide efforts and discuss doctrine and synodical procedure, but

largely to provide a venue for pastors to excitedly confer with one another about the things they've done, to tell one another how they've seen the Gospel work.

Jesus wanted the disciples to have the opportunity to make their report, but they were apparently gathered at a busy intersection, with many people "coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat." Jesus drew them away, because he wanted them to be refreshed, physically with food after their long journey, and also emotionally and spiritually. These were his undershepherds, men who had to learn from their Teacher and then be sent out to proclaim the same message. They needed encouragement to know that they had done the right thing, they needed support from their Teacher, and they also needed support from their fellow workers, to know that they weren't alone in their experiences. So Jesus sought earnestly to find a place for them to rest.

We, like the apostles, have been sent, with Jesus' words: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations," including the promise, "And behold, I am with you always" (Matt. 28:19-20). We're like the cell phones that get taken out to do day-to-day work, but we also must return to a power outlet, so that our batteries can recharge. Jesus knows our human limitations, and he graciously has provided for us. So he says elsewhere, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). We are blessed with our churches, with our fellow Christians, with God's Word and Sacraments, all designed to refresh us and build us up. We are not asked to withdraw, to hide away and try to replenish ourselves. Our friends in faith put on the face of Jesus and provide the refreshment he promises, through the Word he gives.

II. To Shepherd the Shepherdless

All this we desperately need. We face a world stacked against our message, and that is so often baffling to us, how impossible it seems for us to get through. That is often what causes us to grow so weary. I used to think it went without saying that spiritual concerns were more important than physical concerns. Obviously, we would want eternal life, not just temporal life. When Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" I thought this was a line of perfect, watertight reasoning (Matt. 16:24-26). You'll agree with me, won't you, that the eternal outweighs the temporary? Clearly, if your soul is on the line, you'd rather keep your soul and give up everything else. That seems to be common sense.

But my thought has changed. This is not common sense. Why? Because common sense relies on sense, or on our senses: the five senses of taste, touch, smell, sound, and most importantly sight (although there is an increasing popularity for a sixth sense, the sense of our emotions, our "gut feelings," which is often just as important to us as the sense of sight). If a thing cannot be sensed by one of these, especially sight, then we can't concern ourselves with it. We can't see our souls. We have no reason to think that there's anything beyond this present life. So we'll live to keep our toys while we live. We'll live to have friends and family while we live. We'll live to find comfort while we live. We can't picture anything beyond this life, so we'll concern ourselves with "common sense."

That's why we have the term, "leap of faith." A leap of faith implies that we jump without seeing where we'll land. I picture a moment in the third *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. The hero came to a wide canyon, and could see the pathway continuing on the other side, but there was no bridge present to his senses. But through a legend passed down, he knew that he was supposed to face a particular trial at this point and take a *leap of faith*. So he did literally that. Even though his eyes sensed nothing, he leapt.

What a "leap of faith" really means is that, because our senses can't prove anything to us, we have to trust, we have to have faith, that something else is present, and that that something else will provide for us, will have enough concern for us to come through for us, even though we can't sense it.

Before you start to think otherwise, faith is not necessarily a good thing. You see plaques with "FAITH" stamped on them hanging up in people's houses, and very often you might find out that the people who have these plaques are not Christians. That's because faith may be had in any number of things. Muslims have faith that if they obey their five great pillars, then they will be rewarded with paradise. Hindus have faith that if they are good in this life, they will be reincarnated in the next life into a better position, a higher form of life. And Buddhists believe similarly, but they also have faith that if they rid themselves of all desire in life, if they stop striving, that they will achieve Nirvana, the endless peace of simultaneous perfect existence and nonexistence. Even atheists have faith, perhaps in science, that what has been discovered by human senses

is true, that what is published in public school textbooks is accurate, faith that there is no God who will judge them for their wrongs, or who has any law or expectations.

The people who followed Jesus, desperately, enthusiastically, running from town to town so that the crowd grew larger and larger as they went, had to have a sort of faith. Our text says that “many saw them going and recognized them,” suggesting that they had witnessed something of Jesus and his disciples before. Many in this crowd had *sensed* Jesus’ miracles with their eyes, perhaps even firsthand by touch, and many more had *sensed* his teachings with their ears. Remember, too, the apostles had just returned from a missionary journey, preaching and performing miracles. It’s entirely likely that in these bustling towns, where travelers came constantly, some of those who had heard the apostles’ message from farther out recognized those who had preached to them and wanted to learn more. So indeed, they had *sensed* in some regard. This led them to the *faith* that they could gain something more by following Jesus.

But that wasn’t a sure enough foundation for faith to save them. Jesus saw these people who came to him, having recognized him or his apostles, and knew immediately that “they were like sheep without a shepherd.” They were in fact wandering around blindly. Shepherdless sheep will invariably get themselves lost. They may be fenced in, but the way pastures were spread out so widely, predators might still be inside the fence in some corners. A sheep without guidance could become easy prey to a predator in wait. Or portions of the fence might have crumbled away. A wandering sheep could slip through and be gone forever, falling down a steep cliff or into thorn bushes or other hazards. Jesus knew that these people, like sheep, would not be safe if left to their own

devices, their own five senses. But the problem was that they could not be guided by anything except that which came through their five senses. How would they know where their shepherd wanted them to go unless they heard his voice, saw his hands, felt his staff? So we read, “He had compassion on them.”

The Greek here uses the word *σπλαγχν ἰζομαι*, which comes from another word: *σπλάγχνα*. That’s one of those words that every Greek student loves to learn, partially because it’s fun to say — *σπλάγχνα* — and partially because of what it literally means. It is often translated “compassion” or “mercy.” Sometimes it’s translated into “heart,” as in the phrase, “His heart went out to her.” But the *σπλάγχνα* are literally the guts, the insides, the internal organs like liver, stomach, kidneys. So what was going on with Jesus’ *σπλάγχνα* in our text?

In the ancient world, these organs were the seat of emotions, not the heart. We have our Valentine’s-Day brand of feeling, when we say, “I love you with all my heart,” and when we’re hurt we say, “My heart is broken.” These feelings were felt by the ancient world in the guts. Some of this has carried over today. Think of our expression, to “know it in my gut,” or “to have butterflies in my stomach.” You see, we know what those things mean. We feel them.

Jesus saw these shepherdless sheep, and he was moved to this deep twisting emotion in his *σπλάγχνα*. It bothered him that they could wander aimlessly in this state, come to harm, and perhaps be ultimately damned. Being God, Jesus in fact could see the spiritual condition of these people who were bound to perish. He therefore saw the need for them to be taught and given a firm foundation for true faith.

You might think, as you leave today, as you go out into the world, as you interact with people on a day-to-day basis that the people you speak to can't be ministered to by you. They haven't extended a call to you, have they? They haven't ordained you as their pastor. But that's missing the point. Even ignoring the fact that we are all apostles in the sense that we have all been sent out by Jesus to preach the Word, we can use our senses to recognize need. No, we can't see the heart. But we can see the behavior, and we can hear the words. We can see when someone is living in a sin, something damning to them. We can hear when someone confesses a belief that is contrary to God's Word. When we sense these things, we see a need. And, to paraphrase Martin Luther, "Need knows no laws and follows none." As Christians, we are encouraged: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). This mind is the mind of Jesus, the heart of Jesus, the selfless attitude that wishes only to serve others. Allow yourselves, when you see need for the Gospel, to be moved even in the depths of your σπλάγχνα. Then do what Jesus did: "he began to teach them many things." He provided these people with spiritual refreshment. He taught them the true faith.

All the other faiths of the world will teach you to figure something out for yourself. Even a religion like Islam, which claims a great faith in a God so much higher than human beings, still claims that we must also have faith in our own human abilities to keep the laws of that God. Only the true faith revealed to us in Jesus Christ offers real spiritual refreshment. We are taught in this revealed Word (which is brought to us through our senses, because God knows our limitations), that we cannot have even an

ounce of faith in ourselves. We are sinful, broken, dead and rotting beings. If salvation will come to us, we must have our faith entirely in something else – specifically in that which is revealed to us: the God who came into the realm of our senses, suffered where we were, kept the Law that we couldn't, and took the torturous punishment we deserved. That God, in Christ, rose again from the dead to bring all us dead things into life with him, so that we were provided with true, eternal refreshment for our souls. That's the very message we are able to share, and we are able to share it, because we ourselves are consistently refreshed by it in Christ.

Amen.