

THE SHEPHERD FEEDS YOU

Mark 6:30-44

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

July 18, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 6, verses 30 through 44. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 6, beginning at verse 30, we read in Jesus' name.

³⁰ The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ 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. ³² And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. ³⁶ Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” ³⁷ But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” And they said to him, “Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?” ³⁸ And he said to them, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” And when they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” ³⁹ Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. ⁴¹ And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. ⁴² And they all ate and were satisfied. ⁴³ And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. ⁴⁴ And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are sheep. And I'm not just talking about Christians. This isn't just a “Dear saints” kind of thing, but “Dear humans.” We're talking about all people. You are sheep. The issue is really whether or not you have a shepherd. Because, if you don't have a shepherd, you will have a wolf instead.

Jesus encountered a crowd of people. There were thousands of them. And he had compassion on them “because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (6:34). And it's not just these thousands whom Jesus has compassion on, but the whole world. It's what Jesus saw from heaven before his incarnation. He saw a world of sheep without a shepherd, and he had compassion. And in that world of sheep without a shepherd, was you, and Jesus had compassion on you.

Sheep, despite being relatively large, are among the most vulnerable animals in the world. They're not very good at finding food and water for themselves, and they are ill-equipped to defend themselves from hungry predators. This is why God describes us as sheep.

THE SHEPHERD FEEDS YOU (Mark 6:30-44)

We don't really like this. We have an illusion of self-sufficiency. We have superior intellect over the animal kingdom, so we use our reason to build luxurious shelters, grow our own food, and subdue even the most dangerous animals in the world. But we think too narrowly. When it comes to the food that endures to eternal life, we are incompetent. When it comes to the eternal dwelling of heaven, we are lost. And when it comes to the unseen forces of evil, we are defenseless sheep. We are all sheep, and the issue is whether or not you have a shepherd, because if you don't have a shepherd, you will have a wolf.

In this passage, Jesus performs a sign to show the way he shepherds his sheep. There's a difference between a miracle and a sign. Do you know what I mean? A miracle and a sign are not necessarily the same thing. There is some overlap between them. A thing can be both a miracle and a sign at the same time, but not all signs are miracles, and not all miracles are signs, although, I suppose, most of them are.

A miracle, and I mean a real, genuine miracle, is some kind of occurrence that transcends God's established laws of how the universe functions. It's supernatural. It would be like if you drop a bowling ball off a tall building, but instead of falling, it just hangs there in midair, or maybe it falls up. And it's not a trick. It's not like you use fishing line to hold it up or a really strong magnet to pull it in a different direction. You do it by overruling the laws of the universe. That's a miracle.

But a sign is communication. A sign teaches something. So a sign can be as simple as a poster saying, "Vacation Bible School: July 18-22." That communicates something, but it's not a miracle. Miracles become signs as soon as someone witnesses them. If no one sees your bowling ball trick, it's just a miracle. But if you invite a crowd to watch it, then it becomes a sign to them. And it might be a simple sign. It might simply mean that you have authority over the laws of physics. Or you might use it as a sign of something more. You might use it to say that you're going to prevent the stock market from falling. That would be a deeper level meaning of the miracle.

So Jesus' miracles are always signs of something. The mere fact that there were witnesses who recorded them makes them signs to us. They always teach us something. On the most basic level, they teach that Jesus possesses authority over the laws of the universe. For example, when he calms the storm, it teaches that he has authority over the wind and the sea (Mark 4:41). When he casts out demons, it teaches that he has authority over the demons, and even over Satan (Mark 3:23-27). When he heals the sick and raises the dead, it teaches that he has authority over illness and death. The first and most basic level of the signs is that Jesus has the authority to do what he just did. This is pretty obvious.

But there is usually a second or even a third level of meaning. In the second level is the fairly simple conclusion that Jesus is God. We infer this from the miracle itself, because who has authority to overrule the laws of the universe? Only the creator. He wrote the laws of the universe.

Now, there are other people in the Bible who perform miracles, but we don't conclude that they are God. Among the prophets, Moses and Elijah performed a number of signs, but they did their mighty works in the name of Yahweh. And Jesus' apostles also cast out demons and healed the sick (Mark 6:13), but they did all of this in the name of Jesus (Acts 3:6; 4:30; 16:18). The prophets and apostles performed mighty signs by the authority of God.

But Jesus does signs and wonders by his own authority. He says to a demon, **“Be silent, and come out of him!”** (Mark 1:25). When a leper says to Jesus, “If you will, you can make me clean,” Jesus says, **“I will; be clean”** (1:40-41). Jesus doesn’t say, “God wills it.” He says, **“I will.”** He says to a paralytic, **“Rise, pick up your bed, and go home”** (2:11). Jesus speaks to the wind and the sea, **“Peace! Be still!”** (4:39). He raises a young girl from death by saying, **“Talitha cumi.”** That means, **“Little girl, I say to you, arise”** (5:41). He doesn’t appeal to God for authority to do these things, he just does them, because he is God. So in this second level of meaning, the signs teach us that Jesus is God.

And also in this second level, or if you want, you could call it a third level, the signs often reveal something more specific about Jesus’ nature or his mission. Like when he heals the paralytic, he does it in order to prove that he has authority to forgive sins (2:10). That’s a pretty easy one to figure out, because Jesus says that’s what it means. Other signs require a little bit of reasoning to figure out, like when Jesus casts out demons, it shows that he came to triumph over the devil. That is, he crushes the head of the serpent, just as God promised in Genesis 3 (v. 15). Calming the sea signifies that Jesus has authority over chaos and evil, because a raging sea is an ancient symbol of chaos and evil. Healing the sick and raising the dead signifies that Jesus will raise the dead and heal his believing saints on the Last Day. His greatest sign is his own resurrection from the dead, which shows that his sacrifice was acceptable to God as an atonement for our sin. These are not just bare miracles for us to “Ooh” and “Ah” over like fireworks or a magic show. But they reveal the compassion Jesus has for you, and the specific ways Jesus acts on that compassion for you. The miracles are signs of how he loves you.

And this is how we should look at the feeding of the five thousand. It’s a big miracle, because that’s a lot of food, and Jesus just multiplied it out of five loaves and two fish. That’s really impressive. I’m sure the people appreciated it. But Jesus didn’t have to do it. If food was really the issue, he could have just sent the people away, like the disciples suggested (6:36). And most people can skip a meal and be fine. For some of us, myself included, it might even be a good thing. So the miracle wasn’t necessary, like many of Jesus’ miracles were. And no one asked Jesus to do this. With most of Jesus’ miracles, especially with the healings, people came to Jesus and asked him for help. And those miracles were really life-changing. But this was one meal that no one even asked for. It was all Jesus’ idea, so the emphasis is really on what the miracle teaches.

The feeding of the five thousand appears in all four gospels. And that is quite rare. There are only a few other events that appear in all four gospels. And the only other miracle that occurs in all four gospels is Jesus’ resurrection. So the feeding of the five thousand is unique among the rest of Jesus’ miracles, and it’s for the value of what it teaches.

Like every miracle of Jesus, it teaches us that he has authority. In this case, he has authority over food. And he uses this authority for our good. “God ... gives daily bread to all men, even to the wicked” (*Luther’s Small Catechism*, “The Lord’s Prayer”). It’s interesting that while Jesus was feeding the five thousand, he was also feeding the whole world, just in a less obvious way. So it teaches us that our daily bread comes from the Lord, even when we don’t ask for it.

But there’s more to this than bread and fish. All four gospels connect the feeding of the five thousand to the Exodus. But Mark has something that the other three don’t have, and this becomes Mark’s emphasis. Mark connects the feeding of the five thousand with our Old

THE SHEPHERD FEEDS YOU (Mark 6:30-44)

Testament lesson, Jeremiah 23, and also Psalm 23. So Mark uses the feeding of the five thousand to teach that Jesus is the true shepherd of Israel.

In verse 34, Mark says, “When [Jesus] went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” This recalls Jeremiah 23, where the LORD, Yahweh, condemns the so-called shepherds of Israel, who had scattered his flock, and he promised to gather them again and set shepherds over them.

Now, if this were the only clue, we might still notice, but we wouldn’t be quite as certain about the connection. But there’s another clue, and it’s kind of a weird one, but I think that makes it fun. It’s in verse 39, where Mark says that Jesus “commanded them all to sit down ... on the green grass.” This recalls Psalm 23, where David says, “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures” (v. 1-2). Green grass might seem like a weak connection, but hang with me for a moment. None of the other gospels mention green grass. They all mention the people sitting down. Matthew and John even mention that they sat on grass. But Mark is the only one that mentions the color green. This might not seem like a big deal to us, because we see green grass all over the place; it’s almost as common as brown grass. But aside from Psalm 23 and Mark 6, there’s only one other passage in the entire Bible that even mentions green grass (Rev. 8:7). So this connection between Psalm 23 and the feeding of the five thousand is quite striking. When Jesus commands the people to sit down on the green grass, it recalls Psalm 23, where the LORD, Yahweh, makes his sheep to lie down in green pastures.

And when we combine this connection with the one about the shepherd in Jeremiah 23, Mark’s theme emerges that Jesus is our shepherd. And in both of the Old Testament passages, Jeremiah 23 and Psalm 23, the shepherd is the LORD, Yahweh. So Mark is also teaching that Jesus is God. He is the LORD. He is the same God who created the heavens and the earth. He is the same Yahweh who led Israel out of Egypt. This is the same Yahweh who shepherded David and promised in Jeremiah 23 to gather his sheep.

When Jesus feeds the five thousand as they rest on the green grass, he teaches that he has come to do what Jeremiah prophesied. He came to gather his sheep from all over the world and set faithful shepherds over them. He gathers Jews and Gentiles, men and women, old and young, rich and poor, sinners and ... well, just sinners, because that’s all there is. He gathers lost sheep, who have been scattered with no shepherd to lead them, protect them, or feed them. He gathers us together into one flock. We call it the Church. And there he feeds us.

And what does Jesus feed us with? We’re not really talking about bread and fish anymore. Jesus feeds us with the Word of God. When Jesus saw that “they were like sheep without a shepherd,” what did he do? “He began to teach them many things” (6:34). This is how Jesus feeds his flock. He feeds us with the Word of God, because **“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”** (Matt. 4:4; Deut. 8:3). That is why the flock of Jesus Christ, the Church, exists.

And this is why Jesus appointed pastors in his Church. The word “pastor” means “shepherd.” In Jeremiah 23 Jesus promised to “set shepherds over them who will care for them” (23:4). Jesus appointed pastors in his Church in order to feed his flock.

It’s kind of interesting to see the way this is pictured in the feeding of the five thousand. When the disciples present Jesus with the problem, that is, that they had no food for all these people, Jesus says to them, **“You give them something to eat”** (6:37). This is so absurd it’s actually kind of funny. How are these twelve guys going to feed five thousand men plus women and children (Matt. 14:21)? But it turns out that Jesus was serious. We see this when Jesus

THE SHEPHERD FEEDS YOU (Mark 6:30-44)

distributes the food. It says, “He broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people” (6:41). The disciples fed the people with the bread Jesus gave them.

This is a helpful picture of the pastoral office. Pastors deliver the Word of God to Jesus’ flock. They deliver Jesus’ gifts. These are not a pastor’s gifts. They are not a pastor’s words. They are Jesus’ words and gifts to his flock. If a pastor were dependent on his own wisdom and insight, he could no more feed your spirits than the twelve disciples could have fed this massive crowd. It would be no better than another sheep trying to lead, feed, and defend a flock.

And this is what distinguishes a sermon from a lecture. The value of a lecture depends on the speaker. But a sermon—and I mean a proper Christian sermon, the kind that Jesus commands—is different. It does not deliver the wisdom of the pastor. It delivers the declaration of God. So when a pastor declares, from the Word of God, that such and such is a sin, that’s not his wisdom of how to have a good life. That’s the declaration of God. And when a pastor declares to you that your sins are forgiven, that’s not a therapist helping you forgive yourself. It’s the declaration of God. And when a pastor preaches the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, he’s not sending out positive vibes to give you a better outlook on the future. It’s the sure and certain promise of God. That’s what you should expect from a sermon. That’s what you should receive from a sermon. And that’s why a sermon is valuable to you, even if you don’t learn anything new. It’s the declaration of God.

And here is God’s declaration: We are sheep. Without Jesus as our Good Shepherd, we would be scattered and lost in rebellion against God. We would have no way of feeding ourselves or returning to God’s flock. But Jesus is your Good Shepherd. Because of his great compassion, he purchased you by laying down his own life for you. So he forgives you all of your sin. He took his life up again so that he can live forever as your True Shepherd. Through the work of his Holy Spirit, he has called you into the one holy Christian and apostolic Church. And here he feeds us with the Word of God, and even with his own body and blood. These are gifts that will sustain our souls unto eternal life. And at the Last Day, he will raise the dead and transform all of his believing saints into his perfect image. These are the sure and certain promises of God. And this is how Jesus Shepherds his sheep. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.