

34 Mark 6:30-44

The Compassionate Shepherd

Text

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.

Introduction

I began the story of the Herod family last week, and now let me provide some additional information. Mark, perhaps with a touch of irony, refers to Herod Antipas as King Herod. He was no king at all. When his father Herod the Great died, his kingdom was divided among his sons. Herod the Great was a king, but when Jesus was born as the rumored king of the Jews he had all the boys 2 years and under. Now his son Herod Antipas also fears Jesus.

You'll recall that Herod Antipas divorced his first wife and married his step niece Herodias. But that little move offended the Arabian king whose daughter was rejected. This king attacked Herod and destroyed his army. Herod himself survived and at a later time went to the emperor to be crowned as king only to be exiled for the remainder of his life. Josephus records that the Jews believed this was God repaying Herod for the murder of John.

In the light of Herod's failed kingship Jesus stands tall. The messianic expectations of Jesus as the new Davidic king are at a fever pitch as we will see next week. Against the murderous actions of Herod is the compassionate actions of Christ. Against the backdrop of Herod's self-centered sensual feast is this compassionate feeding of the masses by Christ. The shepherd motif in the OT was rich with kingly overtones. A king should tend to and not murder those under his care.

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.

The disciples return and report to Christ the results of their activity. They have been very busy, just as their Lord has been. The same kind of result we saw with Christ we now see with his disciples. The crowds are coming and the disciples have absolutely zero time, not even to eat. Thus Jesus invites them to retreat with him to a remote place in search of rest.

The Great Shepherd

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. Mark is connecting this following to the mission of the twelve. Normally the focus is on Jesus alone, but this time it is on the group of Jesus and the twelve. When the crowds saw *them* and recognized *them* and got there ahead of *them*. The focus shifts back to Jesus alone in verse 34, but we should not miss the connection to the mission of the twelve.

Jesus sees the people and he has compassion on them. Even though he has been working hard and his disciples have been working hard, so hard in fact that they could not even eat, still Jesus has compassion on the masses and begins to teach them. What an amazing statement that is.

Are we a people of compassion? Do we see people who have a real need of the gospel and do we have compassion on them? Or do we see needy people and become annoyed with them? The term for this has reference to one's bowels. There are times when the feeling you have, whether it be grief that you feel in the pit of your gut, or an excitation of something that gives you butterflies in your stomach, there are those feelings that we sense in our gut. This is the term for compassion in this text. Jesus saw these people and he felt a compassion for them in his gut. This is a deep seated compassion. Does not this nation look like a people without a shepherd? Do you feel for them?

Mark says that Jesus had compassion on them because they were like "sheep without a shepherd." That phrase is an echo of Numbers 27:17 and Ezekiel 34:5.

Lessons from Numbers

In Numbers 27:17 Moses asks, "who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep that have no shepherd." This is at the end of Moses' life and the people are on the verge of entering the promised land. But because Moses hit the rock at Meribah 2 times (Num 20:11) with his staff instead of just once (Ex 17:6), he was told that he would not enter the Land. We tend to think of that judgement as pretty harsh. Allow me to say two things on that point: First, it is not harsh. It only seems harsh because we receive so much grace on a regular basis that we have come to expect it. We would complain a lot less if we actually knew and were convinced of our depravity and God's holiness. Understanding those two truths and intellectually and existentially would

keep us from making this first mistake of thinking that God's judgement was too harsh. God didn't have to bring Moses out at all. God did not have to give Moses the chief place among an entire nation. God did not have to include Moses in his great acts of redemption. But He has done all of this, and there are greater things yet in store for Moses. So no, Moses did not get a bum deal here.

Second, although this was not a harsh judgement does seem to be a deviation from God's normal display of grace. It is still grace.? God does not owe us anything. But normally his grace covers incidences like this. The reason that we come to expect it as owed to us is because God rarely ever brings punishments for sins on this level. Justice demands he should! We deserve the punishment, but the costly and precious blood of Christ has purchased the grace that so often covers these sins.

But now the question becomes, "Why has God deviated from his normal trend of extending grace over sins like these?" We do not serve a capricious God who willy nilly decides to be gracious one day and just the next. Again I must forcefully insist that this is not wrong! Even if he did that it would be OK. But he doesn't make these shifts arbitrarily. So why in has he shifted in this case?

Moses was a wonderful leader. He was a humble leader. He was a dedicated leader. He was a leader who could take advice. He sought God earnestly. But he was not perfect. He hit the rock twice instead of once as he should have. A point is made of this sin. Moses could not lead the people into their rest because of that sin. This prompts the question in Num 27 about who will lead the people? Who will take them into their rest? Who is going to be the shepherd to these people? It is not accident that Moses' successor was a man named Joshua. Joshua means savior, and translated into Greek his name is Jesus.

Joshua brought the people into the promised land, and in so doing he foreshadowed the ultimate work of Christ. He brought them in according to the promises that God had given to Abraham. All the land promises found their typological fulfillment in Joshua, but they would find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus.

Lessons from Ezekiel

The other passage that Mark may be alluding to here is Ezekiel 34:5. There are additional clues in verses 14-15 and verse 23.

Ezekiel 34:5 So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts.

I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. 15 I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God.

And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

God describes the people of Israel as a people without a shepherd. He declares that he, the Lord God Almighty will be their shepherd and he will feed them on green mountains. But just a few verses later he declares that he will set up David, his servant as shepherd of the people.

Jesus looked on these people as sheep without a shepherd just as God did in Ezekiel. His

compassionate response is to teach the people. Jesus teaches them for a good long time, and it is becoming late. He has fed them spiritually for perhaps hours. Before he performs this miracle to feed their stomachs he teaches their mind and preaches to their hearts.

The Great Feast

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."

The disciples, looking out for the well being of the people, suggest that they be dismissed in order that they may go into the surrounding villages and get some food. The people walked, or ran many miles to get to where Jesus and his disciples were going. Then out in an uninhabited place they listened for hours as Jesus taught them many things regarding the kingdom of God. But now look at the response that Jesus gives.

37 But he answered them, "You give them something to eat."

I'm sure they sat stunned for just a moment trying to take that in. "Did he really just ask us to feed these people?" We balk at having to provide food for a relatively small group of friends don't we? Sure, we'll do it, after all we are the ones throwing the party, and they are friends after all. But still it is pretty expensive feeding even a small group. Five thousand people is unthinkable.

And they said to him, "Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?"

The disciples did a back of the envelope calculation and sarcastically suggest that they buy 200 denarii worth of bread. 200 denarii was about one year's wage for a day worker. They didn't have that kind of money, not even close. And even if they did, it wouldn't be enough to feed all of these people. Even if it were enough, where are you going to go to buy 5000 loaves of bread? And remember, 5000 was just the number of men.

Even supposing they had large grocery stores like Walmart, could we walk into Walmart and buy 5000 loaves of bread? Not a chance. This command is so far beyond the ability of the disciples to meet that they are beside themselves. And I think that is exactly the point. It needs to be clear that this is not of them. They have zero ability. Their job is just to obey. Without answering their seemingly legitimate analysis of the situation Jesus gives a second command.

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."

Remarkably, the disciples comply. They go in search of food. There is no way that they can feed this many people, and when they raise this point to their master he asks them to count their provisions. It doesn't make any sense, but they comply. Perhaps their trust in Christ is growing. "I don't understand it Jesus, but if you say to look, we will look."

You would not really expect to find much food. Jesus and the disciples got into a boat to make their get away to an uninhabited place, and the crowds saw them leave and went running after them. This was not really a planned event. Perhaps the disciples thought that as they searched, against their expectations, they would find a great deal of food. Maybe Jesus would do something. But as expected they find a measly amount. Five loaves and two fish. That will not work in the least. But what came next was even more amazing. This last command was the

strangest yet.

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.

With no money and hungry people and just the smallest amount of food he commands everybody to sit down in groups that will make the feeding of them easier. When it is as plain as plain can be that there is not enough food, he sets himself up for ridicule. With everybody looking on he takes these two fish and five loaves, breaks the bread and passes it out to his disciples to begin distributing the food.

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.

These loaves of bread, by the way were not large loaves. They were more on the order of a large dinner roll. The disciples may at been at the point of humiliation by each of them taking less than half a loaf of bread and about 1/6th of a fish. Each of their baskets would be empty on the first person. But that is not what happened.

And they *all* ate" Every single person ate. Again we don't know how many people there were, but there were 5000 men. At the minimum there would have been 10,000 people. Matthew records that there were women and children there, so given the average size of families back then it is possible that this crowd was upwards of 25-30,000 people! Everyone of them ate!

What's more, this was no mere communion meal where you get a tiny cracker and a tiny cup. Everyone ate and was satisfied. They were full! There should be no doubt dear Christian that God can meet all of your needs.

This is a very important miracle. This is the miracle that is duplicated later in chapter 8. This is the miracle that Jesus references two times (at the end of this chapter and in chapter 8) as a lesson that he felt the disciples should have learned.

It is the only miracle that is recorded in every one of the gospels. Of the dozens of miracles that he performed this is the only one (aside from the resurrection) that is recorded in every one of the gospels. John gives the connection to Moses and the manna from heaven. Jesus himself is the bread of life which has come down from heaven.

This was not just some amazing picnic. This was not just something to marvel at. This was not just another spectacular event. One of the words for miracles in scripture is *seimion* which means sign. Signs are not the thing itself. Signs are not things to be marveled at in themselves. Signs point beyond themselves. These miracles are pointing to Jesus as the new Moses who leads his people out of slavery; the new Joshua who brings them to the promised rest; the new David who will shepherd and feed his people. These are the lessons that they should be learning. And these are the lessons that we should be learning as well.

This meal anticipates the great wedding feast of the Lamb. Very similar language is used in this account as Jesus uses at the last supper. The Lord's supper itself looks forward to the time when we will all eat with Christ again!