ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost ● July 22, 2018
Jeremiah 23:1-6 ● Psalm 23 ● Ephesians 2:11-22 ● Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

It's hard not to feel a little bad for the disciples. They have just returned from their first travels, out healing the sick and telling people about Jesus. They are tired and hungry, but they have story after story to tell Jesus about how it went. But as soon as they start to tell him anything, they get interrupted by something. And eventually there are so many interruptions that they can't even sit down and eat. And so Jesus has a great idea. Let's get away for a little while. Let's leave the crowds behind and go to our favorite secret spot and get something to eat and we can debrief there and recharge for a bit.

But as they approach the shore, they're met by a huge crowd that followed them along the coast. And when Jesus saw the crowd, Mark says, he "had compassion for them." The Greek word Mark uses here is splagchnizomai (really rolls off the tongue), which is basically the Greek word for having a stomach ache. When Jesus sees the size of the crowd and the depth of their need, his stomach drops. Because he realizes that there's still more yet to do, and neither he nor disciples is going to be able to get "away… and rest a while."

It seems like Jesus can't go anywhere without running into that crowd. And maybe we know the feeling, because we can't look at any of today's readings without running into them either. So who are these people exactly, the ones St. Mark calls sheep without a shepherd?

The prophet Jeremiah says they're the people of Israel who have been abandoned by their leaders. After being led out of slavery by Moses, God provided for them in the wilderness for forty years until they reached the promised land. But their leaders' greed and opportunism have scattered the flock and driven them away from their covenant with God. Ironically, it's not the scarcity of the wilderness that has scattered the people. It's the wealth and abundance of the promised land.

St. Paul says they're the non-Jews who, because they were "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel" believed that they were without "hope and without God in the world." Because they didn't have the right lineage, the right ancestors, they believed that they were outside of God's new community. They thought they would always be second-class citizens in the kingdom of God.

And Jesus says they're the ones who followed him from town to town. Overlooked by their leaders. Seen as expendable by those in power. Left to sort things out for themselves, chasing Jesus's boat as it goes along shore. They are like sheep without a shepherd not because they've wandered off from the flock but because their shepherd has wandered off from them.

It's tempting to make today's gospel a story about rest and how good it is. There are plenty of greeting cards with the pictures of remote beaches and wooded trails with the phrase "Come away and rest for a while…" in flowery script. But you could make the exact opposite case and say that this a story about how rest is overrated. After all, those greeting cards don't include the next part when Jesus says, "Actually, never mind. We don't have time." It's easy to think that Jesus is calling us to ignore our need for rest. And many of us

seem to think that we haven't truly followed the light of the world unless we're completely burned out.

But this isn't a story about rest. It's really a story about these two groups of people and how Jesus relates to them. One group is the disciples recovering from their hard work in mission. Jesus's close circle of followers who he has taught and cared for and worked with. And the second is the crowd waiting for Jesus's boat to come ashore. Completely desperate for any sign of good news. This crowd isn't on the agenda for the day. No one has planned for this. Jesus and the disciples have other stuff they need to get done. So what do you do?

John XXIII, who was the pope in the early 1960's, used to say that the church should be "a church that is and works to be a church for everyone, but particularly for the poor." A church that is for everyone, but particularly for the poor. That kind of thinking isn't familiar to most of us. It might even make some of us uncomfortable. We're used to the first half of that phrase. The church for everyone. God's love for everyone. God's grace for everyone. And we're used to the second half of that phrase. There are all kinds of institutions or groups that are for particular people. Those two ideas are fine by themselves but they're hard to reconcile. It feels like you have to pick one or the other. Because we're used to thinking that if something is for one group in particular, then it must not really be for everyone. That as our embrace gets wider, it also gets a little bit cheaper.

One of the reasons we have such a hard time squaring those two ideas is because our default setting is to start at the universal and go to the particular. Think about the way we usually talk about God's love. We say that God loves everyone and then we say that because God loves everyone, God must love this person in particular. This is totally flipped from the way that Jesus thinks about it. Jesus goes from the particular person to the universal. How do we know God loves everyone? Because in Jesus Christ, God loves the particular people who have been left behind. The ones who are unloved. The ones who have been abandoned. The ones who are like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus is for everyone, we might say, but he's for the poor in particular.

So what does that look like in Jesus's ministry? It's interesting that Jesus seems to get interrupted all the time. Today his retreat with the disciples gets interrupted by the crowds. A couple of weeks ago we heard how Jesus was on his way to heal Jairus's daughter when he was interrupted by the woman who'd been bleeding for twelve years. There are probably half a dozen stories in Mark's gospel when Jesus gets interrupted in the middle of doing something important. But even as he's getting interrupted, Jesus never gets distracted. And he doesn't get distracted because he doesn't see the interruption as any less important or less worthy of his time just because it isn't convenient. Sometimes, like in today's gospel, it actually seems more important. Jesus is supposed to hang out and debrief with the disciples. But it's the people with the greatest need, the people who have been left like sheep without a shepherd, who end up taking precedence.

So the wideness of God's embrace, the universality of God's love, the scope of God's justice, is revealed precisely in Jesus's reaching out to the particular people who are excluded, the particular hopes that are forgotten, and the particular burdens that go unattended to.

There's always a temptation to call such interruptions a distraction. I've had some conversations recently with the clergy from the Reformed churches in town because their

denomination is making some decisions about how affirming they should be to LGBT folks. They're basically having the same conversations that we were having ten years ago. And since Advent and the ELCA have a reputation as having an affirming posture, they're curious what our process was like and how our policies actually play out in real life. And one of the common refrains they've heard over and over is that the church just needs to move on. Because the conversation about how they can best welcome LGBT folks has become a distraction from doing actual ministry.

Now that's a pretty revealing argument. Because they may think that they're having a erudite conversation about scripture and orientation and identity and polity. But they're really not. Because what they're really having a much more basic argument about the relationship between the universal and the particular. And assuming that because they're spending all this time getting this decision right for this one group of people, they must be missing the big picture.

But making sure these particular folks are being taken care of, making sure they are treated with dignity and respect, making sure the process is handled pastorally and sensitively, that Jesus suggests, that is the big picture. Because the way that we reflect the universal scope of God's love is by making the care of these particular people a priority.

That kind of compassion probably feels unfair to many of us. Just like it feels unfair that the whole church has to put in all this the work to get better at working with a small minority of its members. Just like it felt unfair to many Catholics that John XXIII kept giving the poor a place of privilege in the church. And just like some of those disciples probably sat in the boat after Jesus went into the crowd and thought *Why are we spending all this time on these people?* After all, they haven't done anything to deserve all this special attention.

And that, of course, is the whole point. They haven't. That's why it's grace. Because grace that doesn't upend the ways we ascribe value to people, grace that doesn't disrupt our patterns of living, grace that doesn't strike us as unfair, isn't actually grace at all. Grace is what allows us to say that the problems everyone else calls distractions can be the grace of God interrupting our lives.

That's what it means to be a church for everyone. But a church for the poor in particular. A church that works to be for everyone. But a church for the sheep without a shepherd in particular. And that's what it means to be a church that values many things. But a church that believes in grace in particular.

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