

Pastor's Message – 7/21/24
Mark 6:30-56

Wherever Jesus went, into villages, towns, farms, the marketplaces, or at the lake front, they followed him. They laid the sick on mats in front of him, and begged to touch him, even if only to touch the fringe of his robe. And everyone who touched him was healed.

We heard last week that Jesus' reputation was spreading, heard even by Herod Antipas who thought John the Baptist had come back to life. There are at least two places in the Gospel reading where it says the people recognized Jesus. He was becoming known. What was it about Him that made people recognize Him so quickly? Was it the healing?

Some people need spiritual support and healing, just as those people did who wouldn't leave Jesus alone when he and the disciples were looking for a quiet retreat.

Other people are sick and need physical healing. Of course, we all need healing, it isn't simply restricted to those who are physically sick. Healing encompasses broken relationships and previous hurts and memories which damage and injure us. All of these leave us as less than whole people, people whom God is longing to heal.

I have two stories today about people's need for healing: healing then and healing now.

A traveler was returning to his home from a journey to a distant country. At nightfall he arrived at the entrance to a vast forest. Unable either to delay his journey or retrace his steps, he was prepared to traverse the sullen forest alone when he came upon an old shepherd from whom he asked the way.

"Alas!" cried the shepherd, "it is not easy to point it out, for the forest is crisscrossed by hundreds of paths winding in every direction. They are almost all similar in appearance, though all with one exception lead to the Great Abyss."

"What is the Great Abyss?" the traveler inquired.

"It is the abyss which surrounds the forest," replied the shepherd. "Moreover, the forest is filled with robbers and wild beasts. In particular it is ravaged by an enormous serpent, so that scarcely a day passes but we find the remains of some unfortunate traveler who fell prey to it. Still," the shepherd continued, "as it is impossible to arrive at the place where you

are going without traversing the forest, I have, through a motive of compassion, stationed myself at the entrance of the forest to assist and direct travelers. I have also placed my sons at different intervals to assist me in the same good work. Their services and mine are at your disposal, and I am ready to accompany you if you so desire."

The candor and venerable appearance of the old man satisfied the traveler, and he accepted the proposal. The shepherd held a lantern with one hand and with the other took the arm of the traveler. They then set out upon their journey through the dark forest.

After walking for some distance, the traveler felt his strength waning. "Lean on me," said the shepherd. The traveler did so and was able to continue the journey. At length, the lamp began to flicker.

"Ah!" groaned the traveler. "The oil is nearly spent, and the light will soon be gone. What will become of us now?"

"Do not fear," consoled the shepherd. "We shall soon meet one of my sons, who will supply us with more oil." Just then the traveler perceived a glimmer of light shining through the darkness. The light shone from a small cabin by the side of the narrow path. At the sound of the shepherd's well-known voice, the cabin door swung open. A seat was offered to the weary traveler, and some plain but substantial food was set before him. Thus refreshed, the traveler set out again, guided by the shepherd's son.

In this manner the traveler journeyed on for the rest of the night. From time to time, they stopped at different cabins built along the path. At each stop he obtained refreshment and a bit of rest and was furnished with a new guide. With the dawning of daylight, the traveler arrived without incident at the farthest boundary of the forest. Only then did he appreciate the magnitude of the service rendered him by the shepherd and his sons. At the very edge of the forest, right before his feet, lay a frightful precipice, at the bottom of which he could distinguish the roar of an angry current.

"This," said his guide, "is the Great Abyss which my father spoke about. No one knows its depth, for it is always covered with a thick fog which no eye can penetrate." As he spoke, he heaved a deep sigh, and wiped a tear from his eyes. "You seem grieved," said the traveler.

"How can it be otherwise?" replied his guide. "Can I look at the abyss without thinking of the thousands of unfortunate people who every day are swallowed up in it? In vain do my father and my brothers offer our

services. Very few accept them, and of those few the greater portion, after journeying for a few hours, accuse us of needlessly alarming them. They despise our advice and set out on paths of their own choosing. The consequence is that they soon lose their way and are devoured by the serpent, murdered by robbers, or plunge headlong into the abyss. You see, there is only this one little bridge by which the Great Abyss can be crossed, and the way which leads to the bridge is known to us alone. Pass over with confidence," continued the guide. He turned to the traveler, embraced him, and said, "On the other side is your true home."

The traveler, overcome with gratitude, thanked his charitable guide, and promised never to forget him. He crossed the narrow bridge and discovered he was now in his own land. His family was there to welcome him. ("The Traveler and the Shepherd," from *A Fresh Packet of Sower's Seeds, Third Planting*, by Brian Cavanaugh [Paulist Press, 1994], pp. 47-49)

Some will say this is an obvious reference to Jesus as the only way to salvation. Some may see it as a reference that it is Jesus' followers who are the guides for travelers lost and in need of help along the way. Some may focus on the paralyzing dangers in an unholy world.

Closer to home and perhaps more familiar is the next little story.

It was the first day of a new school year and school buses were on the road picking up children experienced in school bus transportation and those embarking on their first journey with all the fears and anxieties and excitement that accompanies the first day of school.

In front of one farmhouse, already loaded up with children, one of those school buses had stopped, preparing to move out into traffic. Several vehicles had lined up in both directions, in various states of impatience, waiting for traffic to move again.

But there, amid all the wheels and engine noises and vehicles hurrying away from the bottleneck, crouched a tiny white kitten. A dart this way, then the other way. Then it huddled, immobile with fright, a little pink mouth wide open in a wail of terror – matched by the terror of a tear-stained face pressed against the rear window of the bus. At that moment, a small red convertible came out over the crest of the hill, traveling flat out. Seemed like it was all over for the tiny white kitten.

The small red convertible came closer and there was a sudden flash of brake lights. A door popped open; a young woman's arm reached down to the pavement and scooped up the kitten. In less than a second,

the car had made a squealing turn off the highway into a gravel driveway of the farm. The young woman ran to the house, popped open the house door, thrust the kitten inside, and then she was back to the car and on her way back to the highway in a shower of gravel. And the kitten was saved.

Despite Jesus' frequent warnings not to tell anyone (the "Messianic secret") of these healings, people began to spread word of Jesus' and his disciples' work. The more people who knew, the more people came seeking healing. Is this not how we would expect these events to unfold? The more widely the healing was proclaimed, the more people were drawn to Jesus. In time, large crowds numbering in the thousands came to Jesus. What did he do? He fed them. Sharing loaves and fishes was more than sitting down and eating; it was a gracious offering of abundant mercy from the Son of God. Just as an abundance of people followed Jesus, an abundant meal was set before them.

We Christians, we churchgoers, followers of Jesus, are now the eyes and ears and hands and feet of Jesus. And the mission of the church is still very much as it was in those early days. We are still called to teach and to heal and to spread the gospel. Sometimes we are called to be those who lead by patience and steadfastness – waiting for just the right moment, persevering and ready for just that one person who needs guidance to find Jesus.

Sometimes, we are called to offer grace and aid in times of emergency – poised to swoop in when the worst seems bound to happen. In either instance, Jesus offers healing through us.

Jesus *is* hope for healing to the disciples and the world. No matter where they traveled, Jesus drew crowds who were seeking healing. The world certainly needs healing today. Is the service that you do offering healing and hope? Does a message of grace resonate from this church into the community and beyond by your words and actions? Is this congregation a place of peace and healing? What draws crowds to this place and is it the peace and healing that Jesus offers?

That is both our call and our joy: to be a place and a people of healing. We are called to be ready to be a place of grace: grace offered, and grace received.