

## Mark 6:30-34

Pentecost 9; July 21 & 22, 2024

Many years ago, on a bitterly cold evening in northern Virginia, an old man waited by a river, hoping for a horseman to carry him across. His beard was frosted, and the frigid wind left his body numb and stiff.

He heard the faint rhythm of approaching hooves on the frozen path and anxiously watched as several horsemen rounded the bend. He let the first few pass by without trying to get their attention. Finally, the last rider neared, and the old man, sitting like a snow statue, caught his eye. *"Sir, would you mind giving an old man a ride to the other side? There doesn't appear to be a passageway by foot,"* he asked.

Reining his horse, the rider said, *"Sure thing. Hop aboard."* Seeing the old man couldn't lift his half-frozen body, the horseman dismounted and helped him onto the horse. He took the old man not just across the river but to his destination a few miles away. As they approached a tiny cottage, the horseman asked, *"Sir, I noticed you let several riders pass without asking for a ride. Then you immediately asked me. Why wait for the last rider on such a bitter night? What if I had refused and left you there?"*

The old man slowly dismounted, looked the rider in the eyes, and said, *"I've been around here a long time and know people well. I saw no concern in the eyes of the other riders, so I didn't bother asking. But in your eyes, I saw kindness and compassion. I knew your gentle spirit would help me in my time of need."*

The horseman was deeply touched. *"Thank you,"* he told the old man. *"I hope I never become too busy to help others with kindness and compassion."* With that, Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, turned his horse and rode back to the White House.

Just as Thomas Jefferson showed compassion to this man, Jesus shows compassion to the crowd in our text today is evident: **"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd."** In the ancient Middle East, a shepherd needed various skills, such as knowledge of edible grasses, hoof trimming, predator defense, and lamb birthing. Yet, the most essential quality was simpler—genuine care for the sheep. Without this compassion, none of the other skills would be fully effective. Similarly, the defining characteristic of Jesus, the Great Shepherd, is his compassion.

Jesus' compassion extended beyond the large crowd to his disciples as well. Last week's Gospel lesson recounted Jesus sending his disciples out in pairs on their first missionary journey. Today, we recount their return and their report to Jesus. While Mark doesn't provide all the details they shared, it's clear they were eager to share their experiences. Despite their excitement, they needed rest after their extensive travels. In the verses just before our text, we are told that while they were gone, John the Baptist had been put to death. To escape the crowd and have compassion on his disciples as they heard the news about John, they boarded a boat and set sail on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus said to them: **"Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." So, they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.** Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus said to them while they sailed across the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps, he talked about the death of John the Baptist. Perhaps, he needed to encourage them about the plans that they had and the unexpected death of John the Baptist.

We all live in the tension between our plans and interruptions, our expectations and the unexpected, life as we want it to be and life as it happens. Every one of us could tell a story about that. It happens in small ways and in large ways. It's the baby waking up early from what you thought would be a quiet hour, or a day that had nothing on the calendar that turns into a day of one thing after another. It's taking a new job and finding that you are not doing what you planned, and you are doing what you never expected. It's the diagnosis that interrupts retirement plans. It's a shattered dream, a divorce, a death. Our life plans get interrupted in a thousand different ways and the unexpected happens all along the way of life. It is then that we also need to know that Jesus has compassion on you and me as well.

The disciples weren't the only ones who needed to witness and hear Jesus' compassion. The crowds were relentless. When they saw Jesus and his disciples sail away, they journeyed on foot around the Sea of Galilee to meet them on the

other side. Mark writes: **“But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So, he began teaching them many things.”** Jesus knew that the thousands of people who had followed him needed to hear his words of compassion. When he saw the crowd on the other shore, he didn’t turn the boat around or react with anger or resentment. He didn’t blame or complain. Instead, he simply had compassion on them. He fed them spiritually with his compassionate words. Afterward, as we will see next week, he would also feed the 5,000 men and their families with food.

By doing so, Jesus was also teaching his disciples an important truth as well. Not only does Jesus want to give us physical rest as he did with his disciples as they traveled across the Sea of Galilee, he also sees that we all need the spiritual rest that only Jesus can give. Isn’t that also the reason that you are here today? We have come to hear Jesus’ words of compassion. We have come to hear that our sins are forgiven. We have come to hear that even though we may have no idea why plans are unfolding the way in our lives; we need to hear Jesus say to us that he knows and knows how best to comfort us. We need to hear that the Savior, who died and rose from the grave, rises and lives in us as well. That’s the compassion that Jesus has upon you.

The story is told of two men who were lumberjacks. One day one of the challenged the other to an all-day tree chopping contest. The challenger worked very hard, stopping only briefly for a brief lunch break. The other man had a leisurely lunch. He took several breaks during the day. At the end of the day, the challenger was surprised and annoyed for that the other man had chopped down significantly more wood than he did. He turned to the other man and said: *“I don’t get it. Every time I checked, you were taking a rest, yet you chopped more wood than I did. How did you do that?”* *“But you didn’t notice, that I was sharpening my ax when I sat down to rest.”* The words and promises of Jesus not only bring rest to our souls, it also sharpens us to work for Jesus. As we see the kindness and compassion of Jesus, let others also see the heart of Jesus in our words and actions. Amen.