

The Table of Grace
Mark 6: 30-44

So much has happened in this sixth chapter of Mark. The opening verses find Jesus in his hometown of Capernaum where he was rejected. His own people, who were once proud of him, were now angry and skeptical. Frustrated by their unbelief in spite of his teachings and miracles, he and the disciples continued their journeys in the region of Galilee going from village to village. He sent the disciples out in teams of two to act on his behalf, and they joined him in healing and teaching. Then the news came to them that John the Baptist - the one who had sent Jesus into ministry through baptism, the one who also taught of Jesus as the Messiah, the one who was Jesus' family - was brutally killed by Herod Antipas, son of the Herod who ordered the slaughter of children near the time of Jesus' birth. What a whirlwind of events! What a maelstrom of emotions that threatened to engulf them! The pain of rejection by their own, the exhilaration and exhaustion of those early ministry days, the devastating grief at the horrific death of someone so close, and a growing anxiety about what their own future held.

As they huddled together sharing it all, Jesus told them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."¹ Just what they all needed! Support from one another, rest, solitude, quiet, a break from it all. They needed a Sabbath. "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy."² One of the oldest commandments of the faith. Rabbi Abraham Heschel said of the Sabbath, "Sanctifying the Sabbath is part of our imitation of God, but it also becomes a way to find God's presence."³ Exactly what they needed, what is essential for us all - finding our way to God's presence.

However, the rest they so desperately sought would not be found - at least, not in the way they expected. "As [Jesus] went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things."⁴ As worn out as he was, Jesus recognized the need of the people there and taught them 'many things'. He didn't cure or perform miracles or any of the other mighty acts of power for which he was rapidly becoming known. He entered into relationship with them and taught, showing them a new world of possibility and hope. But

¹ Mark 6: 31b NRSV

² Exodus 20:8 NRSV

³ Abraham Joshua Heschel. *Sabbath*. Farrar Strauss Giroux. 2005. (first published 1951).

⁴ Mark 6: 34 NRSV

even as he fed their souls, another need arose within the vast numbers of people, a much more pressing need - hunger. It was late, they were far from town, and they had so little. The disciples, tired themselves and trying to protect Jesus from the constant demands, wanted to send the crowds away. But Jesus turned to his disciples, "*You give them something to eat.*"⁵ And all their needs - the need for rest and renewal for Jesus and his disciples, the hunger of the crowds for Jesus' teachings, the physical hunger that touched them all - came crashing together and found a home in one of the most well-known events of Jesus' ministry.

Sandwiched in the midst of the building trauma in the life and ministry of Jesus is this story of the feeding of the multitudes, one so vital to the earliest followers after Jesus' death that it is found in all four gospels, repeated twice in Matthew and Mark. Its imagery pulls the listener back to the green pastures of the 23rd Psalm, pushes them forward to Jesus' last night, finds a home each time we today break bread, and speaks of God's promised future of hope. Yes, it's that important. And in today's world that seems so lost, confused, and angry, a world filled with a mountain of needs that threaten to overwhelm us, it is imperative we find our place in this moment in Jesus' life.

Something keeps bringing us week after week. Like Jesus and the disciples sought on that day, we come here to find rest and renewal for our weary hearts and souls. As Jesus taught the crowds, our souls find satisfaction in worship, in learning, singing, praying. As the disciples and Jesus lived as a community within themselves, as the people gathered together to listen and share a meal, so do we enjoy our relationships. As has been evident time and time again, the ministry of this congregation defies the statistics and odds. Yet, as much satisfaction and comfort as we derive from being together, playing together, working together, there is an indefinable 'more' that draws us here, that keeps us here, and then sends us out into the world to share what we have known.

"Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men."⁶ That statement at the close of today's text has always brought me to a halt from the time I was young. Though the gospel of Mark is far from a literary masterpiece, it is an accurate reflection of the culture. Men would have been the official

⁵ Mark 6: 37b NRSV

⁶ Mark 6: 44 NRSV

count. Women and children were property, not full-fledged persons. Moreover, it would have been male *citizens*, not refugees, nor visitors, nor poor people without property, nor non-believers. To be counted, one had to matter in the eyes of society. In this way, the writer of Mark's gospel is compliant with the demands of his world. Yet there is also a subversive movement in the recording of the events of the day, one that originates in the actions of Jesus.

Jesus, regardless of what was going on with him personally, saw the *crowd* and had compassion. Not just the men, not just Jews, everyone there. Nor was it a sense of pity that moved Jesus but a visceral, gut-wrenching reaction that caused him to respond. He fully identified with them as fellow creations of God, not from a lofty perch of superiority but as one of them, one also hungry, tired, seeking something. He created community by noticing their need and responding from the depths of his being. He fed them, teaching about God, about love, about acceptance, about the 'more' they so desperately needed to hear. He created community by inviting them to gather on the green grass, to rest, to discover the miracle of a few meager morsels becoming a feast. He *showed* the 'more' that drew them to him. And he did it for them *all*:

Then he ordered them to get *all* the people to sit down in groups on the green grass.
He divided the two fish among them *all*.
And *all* ate and were filled.⁷

No test of merit, no test of worth, no judgment - an act of deep-hearted compassion that created for them God's beloved community. All. Jesus built a bigger table that included them all. "It's bigger because each person's inherent worth is protected there."⁸ They found a place of belonging, of acceptance, of value, the Table of God's inestimable and infinite grace.

There are many reasons we come here - to worship, to work, to play. At the core of all our various motivations is this feeding of the multitudes. For here in this place the home of our hearts begins to take shape and become reality in our lives. Here we find true Sabbath, a Sabbath that becomes part of our beings, for it is a Sabbath of the soul, a place for God and God's community. This is not our

⁷ Mark 6: 39, 41b, 42 NRSV

⁸John Pavlovitz. *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopefully Spiritual Community*. Westminster John Knox Press. 2017.

creation, our exclusive discovery, this is God's Table, one made for all, one that calls us out into the world to re-create it in all our living.

After we bask in the glow of worship, after we share in the bread and the wine, after we enjoy the fellowship that follows, how will we *be* God's Table for the world? For that is our call - to be grace for the world. In the way of Jesus we, too, feel the needs of the world in the depths of our souls. We seek rest for our hearts, we teach, we learn, we eat, we share, we open ourselves to the wonders of God's grace that welcomes us all. Yesterday morning I was tagged in a Facebook post. While many such tags are cute and entertaining, this one made me stop and think. It opened with a young boy saying, 'What do you practice? For what you practice, you will get good at.' No, he was not talking about exercise, or music lessons, or anything like that. He talked about practicing joy and peace and all those characteristics that reflect we are truly made in God's image. As I watched it yet again, I thought about the practice of grace. What if we, as God's beloved community, practice grace? What would that look like as we move into the future? How does that shape what we do and who we become? Together let's do that. Let us practice grace. Let us be God's table of grace for one another, for the community, for all. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

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