

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – July 19, 2015
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

FOR REFLECTION

“It seems to me that in joining a church you leave home and home town to join a larger world. The whole world is your new neighborhood and all who dwell therein – black, white, yellow, red, stuffed and starving, smart and stupid, mighty and lowly, criminal and self-respecting, American or Russian – all become your sisters and brothers in the new family formed in Jesus. By joining a church you declare your individuality in the most radical way in order to affirm community on the widest possible scale.”

William Sloane Coffin, Credo (pp. 142-143)

People, People, People

I think the Lectionary Committee must have been high when they came up with the reading from Mark for this morning. The text is two separate pieces of a much longer narrative – and loses a lot in translation. But I love a puzzle. So here goes.

Mark chapter 6 starts out with Jesus being received poorly in his hometown. He then sends his disciples out two by two to do the work of John the Baptist – call for repentance and do exorcisms and healings. The next part of the text backs up and tells about the beheading of John the Baptist – to explain why the disciples are commissioned by Jesus to continue the work after John was murdered.

AND THEN in verse 30 our text picks up – the disciples return, tell Jesus what they have done, they are all exhausted and Jesus suggests a retreat in order to rest and recuperate. That can't happen because thousands of people keep coming to them, wherever they are. They want healings – and they want the message Jesus is proclaiming about a forgiving G-d and a Beloved Community here on earth.

The text is cut off after 5 verses. We don't hear about the loaves and fish and thousands fed while attending the Jesus Seminar. We don't hear about the disciples getting in a boat to go home while Jesus has a personal retreat on the mountain. The gang has trouble rowing against the wind – so Jesus walks on the water, scares the bejesus out of them, gets in the boat and the water calms down.

AND THEN we get a four verse summary report (53-56) about being swarmed by thousands of people everywhere they go – most of them sick, broken or a caregiver for someone who is sick or broken – all of them seeking, and apparently finding, healing.

In these broken pieces of text we are given images of people – seas of people – rushing, crowding, thick waves of people – spreading out in all directions – or rather rushing in to the center point – which is Jesus. It is an introvert’s nightmare. It is a co-dependent person’s hell. It brings to mind yet another text with a later Jesus saying, “The poor [the lame and sick and bedeviled] will always be with you.” Do what you can.

People, people, people – as far as the eye and imagination can see. If any of us feel overwhelmed – then I’d say we are truly human. When I get upset and overwhelmed by the needs of people – Peter will pat my arm and say compassionately, “Just don’t think about it.” There are a good number of people on this planet who are able to do that – just not think about it. I’m not one of them. And most of us in this room – even if we shut down for a period of time – have to think about it again – and try hard to find something to do about it...

...Which is why we also need some ways to cope with the endless need around us. As with the disciples and their leader, a retreat may not be possible – but if it is, I recommend it. A day, a weekend, a week – to sleep and read and recreate can keep us going for another month or year.

It can also remind us of the reasons WHY we care, WHY we do what we do to alleviate suffering. This “why” is an important core value to keep in the front of our minds – pushing irrelevant and irritating thoughts and motivations to the rear. Even if we can’t get away for retreat, we can have short, personal retreats in our minds for a few minutes a day – refocusing our vision – and remembering our purpose.

How many of you have a personal mission statement – a sentence that kind of sums up what you are about and what your values are? Would anyone like to share theirs?

My personal mission statement is this: “Before I die I will love enough and make a positive difference in the world.” I can’t really quantify the goal – but I can measure by my feelings every day – when I have fallen short or have accomplished enough to feel good about the day. And I define the word “enough” as “what I am able to do with the tools that I have.” No perfection necessary.

One of the things that overwhelms me is the idea that it is my job, our job, to save or heal the world. And when that expectation sets in, the image of a globe filled with faceless crowds of people sucks out my energy and dismantles my motivation. It's very much like walking into the kitchen and seeing a huge, cumulative pile of dirty dishes and pots and pans and the stove covered in cooking debris. Whether or not I made the mess, somebody has to deal with it – and it may as well be me.

The trick to the dishes – start with one little task and leave the room. Clear a space, get some clean sudsy water in the basin – and leave the room. The next time I walk in, wash a few cups or one frying pan – and leave the room. After a few pass-throughs – over time – I can see progress – which gives me the motivation to do more. The job gets done, one tiny task at a time.

The same thing is true with the world and all our people. We need to start with getting faces back onto the people in those crowds.

Think about the most INTERESTING person you've ever met.

Have you got their face in front of you?

What are the details: skin color, hair color and texture and style, clothing, mannerisms. Do they have an accent, speak one or more languages, come from here or somewhere else?

What do they talk about? Is their story familiar or strange?

Are their experiences something you can relate to or learn from?

Are they very much like you or different from you?

Keep that face in the same area in your brain as you keep your mission statement.

Go there when you need to put a face on a problem or issue.

It is likely that when we engage the world around a need – we are going to encounter the most interesting people we've ever met. I find that motivating.

I had a memorable experience twenty years ago that I plan to repeat with Peter this year. I watched the Rose Parade on t.v. and before it ended, spur of the moment, I went down to Colorado Blvd. and stood just behind the crowd on a side street. As the last float went by, I stood still as the crowd gathered their things and dispersed – waves and waves of faces flowing past me – with elation and exhaustion and intention washing over them. The variety of sizes and shapes, colors and clothes, facial expressions and gestures, family configurations and groupings – it was mind-blowing.

When I get overwhelmed with the world's problems – I remember that crowd – the amazing faces and stories going past – and, for some reason, that helps.

What are some of the ways you cope with the overwhelming job of meeting the world's needs?

Scripture Reading for Sunday July 19, 2015 – Pentecost 8

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

(sent out 2x2) (beheading of John the Baptist)

30 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 31 He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves 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 deserted place by themselves. 33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 34 As he 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.

(loaves & fish) (walking on the sea)

Summary Report

53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. 54 When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, 55 and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. 56 And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.