

Pastor T.C. Arnold
7th Sunday after Trinity
Mark 8:1-8
July 30th, 2017

One of the reasons why the Gospel of Mark is one of my favorites is because Mark doesn't mince words. He just goes after it and shows the true wonders of Jesus. This Gospel is the Jesus Christ Superstar Gospel as is evident by how Mark records one miracle of Jesus and then another, and immediate another.

But before diving into the text that is appointed by the church ancient, I would like to "set the stage" with one of these "superstar-like" miracles that happens three chapters earlier; the healing of a demon-possessed man. In this account a man with an evil spirit roamed around the tombs of a graveyard at night in the region of the Decapolis. It says in the text that chains could not bind this man and no one was strong enough to subdue him. He would be heard crying out night and day in the graveyard and also cutting himself with stones. It sounds horrible.

Jesus saw him from a distance and the man ran toward Jesus, fell to his knees in front of him and called him "*Jesus, Son of the Most High God*" as he wondered what Jesus was there to do to him. "*Swear to God that you won't torture me!*" the demon-possessed man said. Jesus commanded the evil spirit to come out and even asked the demon his name. The demon said, "*Legion, for we are many.*" This sounds like a plot for a Marvels Comics movie. And if that isn't strange enough – what happens next might even be more surprising. He casts the demon(s) into pigs. Then, this herd of about two thousand pigs rushed down a steep bank into a lake and were drowned.

I tell you this story because of what Jesus was able to say to this man after all this took place. He told him, "*Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.*" Then he says in verse 20, "*The man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus has done for him. And all the people were amazed.*"

Jesus had "mercy" on this man. Mercy is God's good gifts put into action. By telling this man to go and share this "mercy" to others in the Decapolis, the man who had a demon now shares this "mercy-gift" with all those in that region.

That story in Mark chapter five is important for a very specific reason. You see, Jesus was in the Decapolis – that region beyond the Jordan River – at the time of the feeding of the 4,000 in the text for today. How was it that there were that many people around Jesus, hearing His teaching, hanging on every word in a place known more for pagan worship and false idols? Perhaps it was because of this man who had a demon removed from him by the mere "calling out" of Jesus. And this we know for sure... Jesus had the same kind of compassion on those people hearing His teaching and following him around for three days as He did for the demon possessed man. That compassion came right from His life into their lives. That compassion would feed them and give them what they needed – much like the demon possessed man needed a clean spirit. Jesus could and did give it. He would fill them.

You know, that's what this word in the text for today means – that word in verse two of the text. Jesus had "compassion" on the people. That compassion that Jesus has – is active. It gives and it fills. Jesus gave compassion to a demon possessed man who lived among the tombs. He gave him something of Himself. The man then gave what he had to his neighbor – the Word of Life that is in this Jesus. You get something you can give. And that's what we are to do as well. But we don't always think so. And this is where the text turns in on us. The reason: because we are the ones who answer like the disciples, "*But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?*"

That's a very logical question that would cause any of us concern and seems to deserve a logical answer. You can only give what you have, right? If you don't have it – then you can't give it. Sounds reasonable, I suppose.

The problem is, we sometimes are convinced that we are like these disciples – we have nothing to give. We don't have "enough" to offer. Maybe even more to the point – I'm not sure if I can or even should offer you anything because then I might not have enough. Besides that – I'm not sure what you are going to do with what I offer or give to you. You might squander it. You might sell it. You might not appreciate it. I just don't have enough. I don't think I can spare anything. You are just going to have to go somewhere else.

Have you ever said such things? I have. I know; we try to be careful. We are called to be good stewards of the gifts God has given us and we want to make sure we are living up to that calling. But many times all these "excuses" happen to be just that – "excuses". *"But where in this remote place are we going to get 'enough' bread to feed them?"* The disciples believed they didn't have enough. We sometimes try to convince ourselves into believing we never have enough to share with others. We are barely getting by on our own, right? We are just scraping by. I will wait until I'm a little better off before I help someone else who needs my help.

There's a Jewish feast called the Feast of Purim which usually falls during the Season of Lent. The Feast commemorates the deliverance of which the Book of Esther tells. Above all it is a time of giving gifts; and one of its regulations is that, no matter how poor a person happens to be, he must seek out someone poorer than himself and give that person a gift. Jesus has no time for a spirit which waits until all the circumstances are perfect before He thinks of helping. Jesus says, "If you see someone in trouble, help him with what you have got. You never know what you may do."

The way that Jesus, "poured Himself out" to those in need is from the deepest, farthest reaches from within. This is compassion. Compassion is God's mercy in action. Compassion and mercy are God's gift from within poured out to you. And that mercy works through His children like you and me from within us to outside of us into the lives of others. Jesus' mercy is a gift to you and me. It's what gives us what we don't deserve. It's what chose to die for a sinful world. Mercy is God allowing Himself to suffer and to die. God's mercy is the most heartfelt, Christ-motivated, giving of ourselves that we could possibly ever do. Mercy is a response of our giving because Jesus first gave to us.

This large crowd of Gentiles – more than 4,000 – may have heard that man who was possessed by a demon – profess the truth about what Jesus had done. What Jesus had done is have compassion on him – he had mercy on him. That large crowd of Gentiles – more than 4,000 – received the same kind of "pouring out" of Jesus that day in the Decapolis. God's mercy is always a mercy in action. That means our Christian lives are lives of action. There is no such thing as a passive Christian life. God's mercy acts in Christ and when you have that – it works. It works for the sake of the church, for the sake of our neighbor and for the sake of the Kingdom. You are a part of that because you are a part of that church – Christ's church. Christ made you that way by acting on you and never giving up on you. Jesus' ministry is active – mercy/compassion – never passive. Jesus' children are active in the same mercy and compassion that He first showed on us.

Like the story of the demon-possessed man set the stage for Jesus feeding 4,000 – so does this story for our lives. Jesus feeds you so that you can feed others. Christ feeds you – everything you could possibly need for this life and for the next. He provides for you. He is our bread of life. He gives the undeserved gift of forgiveness of your sins... all of them. This is God's true mercy poured out to you. Thanks be to God! Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.