

Trouble and Grace

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Our Gospel text from Mark this morning includes two brief sets of summary verses about the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. Verses 30-34 describe the disciples' return from their first experiences of being sent out by Jesus to preach and to heal. The lectionary then skips over Mark's account of two of Jesus' most attention-grabbing miracles -- feeding a crowd of 5000 with quite meager provisions and walking across a stormy sea to join the astonished disciples in their boat. It picks back up on the shore with an overview of people's excitement about and expectations of Jesus. Listen now for the word of God to us today.

Today's sermon is rather like a math problem that shows its work or maybe more like a casserole that's put on the table with a print-out of the recipe alongside. Normally, we pastors bring our sermons to the worship table as finished homiletical dishes, ready to be served, but this morning, I am opening the door of the preaching pantry and naming the ingredients as I put them in.

The first ingredient is what we might call "Trouble in the Text".

One of the things we know about Israel / Palestine in Jesus' day is that it was a hard place to live. The people faced threats from multiple directions. The Roman occupation deprived them of liberty. The economic structure deprived many of opportunity. Wealth was highly concentrated within a small privileged class while most people lived at a subsistence level or in poverty. Illness of body, mind, and spirit was ubiquitous, with few treatments available. It was a hard place to live. A place where there was a great and endless need for healing of disease, of deformity, or displacement.

It does not surprise us to read of the crowds pursuing Jesus. We can understand why they are clamoring to get close to this one they have heard about who is traveling through the region with a compassionate presence and a healing touch. We can relate to their hope that contact with him might ease their predicaments, relieve their sufferings.

That brings us to our second ingredient: "Grace in the Text". The witness of the Gospels presents a Jesus of deep compassion and startling power. In the verses we have read today, Mark writes of crowds pursuing and surrounding Jesus wherever he goes. Even when he and the disciples try to slip away for some restful solitude, they are recognized and followed by endless streams of hurting, needy people. Indeed, the episodes summarized in these verses take place on opposite sides of the Sea of Galilee, one on the Jewish side of the lake and the other in a Gentile region. This suggests that distinct and unconnected groups of people throughout a large geographic area have somehow become aware that a compassionate healer is moving through the region. And when word goes out that Jesus is near, the sick come to him.

Everyone who has a sick friend or family member -- everyone who *is* a sick friend or family member -- wants to get close enough to Jesus for a healing touch. We get an image of chaos and confusion -- wherever Jesus goes, the people come and lay the sick in the marketplaces. It seems that Jesus cannot take a step without tripping over another supplicant. Yet rather than being overwhelmed by the constant clamor for his attention and care, Jesus remains responsive. Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm writes that "Throughout all of his encounters with others, Jesus extends divine mercy and compassion to everyone he meets. He is the compassionate shepherd, provider of daily bread, Lord of the sea, and the great Physician." (*Preaching the Gospel of Mark*; p. 120)

Mark says of those who come to Jesus for healing that they "begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed." (v. 56) That must have been some *amazing* fringe. It seems to offer universal healing to Jews, to Gentiles, to the devout, to the reprobate, to the grateful, to the demanding. No distinction seems to be made. Mark does not mention a registration process by which the people who sought healing were asked to demonstrate sufficient faith or piety to qualify for access to Jesus. Jesus says nothing here, as he does in other healing stories, of how their faith has made them well. We might think their pursuit of Jesus indicates faith; people hear he's nearby and rush out, bringing along a lame brother or a chronically ill aunt or a deaf child. Whether people came to Jesus out of faith or out of cautious hope or out of desperation, they came.

And they found compassion. They found the healing they needed; healing which restored them to full inclusion in community and in life. They found the grace of God in the words and in the deeds of Jesus, and even in the very edge of his cloak.

The third component of our sermon casserole is "Trouble in the world". One of the things we know about the world of our day is that it is a hard place to live. And it seems to be getting harder rather than easier. All our vaunted human ingenuity, all our scientific and engineering expertise, all our can-do enthusiasm, all our wealth and innovation and determination have not managed to free the world of the threats we face, either natural or human-produced.

Every news source brings us relentless reports about events and conditions that cause us to feel sorrow or concern or fear about the circumstances of our fellow humans and the future of the planet. The threats of oppression, poverty, and illness that existed in the Israel of Jesus' day have not disappeared over the centuries but have changed with the times and continue to impede human life today.

Like the crowds who came to Jesus so long ago, people still need compassion; still need healing; still reach out with hope toward the possibility of help.

The final ingredient in our sermon, our concluding perspective as we consider what this Scripture has to teach us today, is “Grace in the world”. As we look around, where can we see God at work? Even in the midst of the worst crisis, is there a bright spot that reminds us that creation is securely in the benevolent care of a sovereign God who wills that we shall all flourish?

Grace in the world is about God, but it also includes us. Pastor and theologian D. Mark Davis writes this about the role and the power of grace in the world: “When Jesus proclaims that the Reign of God is at hand, it is an invitation for others to turn around and to participate in it. When Jesus heals, exorcises demons, and even brings life from death, the point is not to show how magical Jesus was, but to demonstrate what it means to participate in the Reign of God here and now.” (*Left Behind and Loving It*)

When we apply the perspective of grace in the world to these verses in Mark about people bringing the sick to Jesus for healing, we might see a clear, strong sign of such grace in the speed and efficacy with which scientists and health professionals developed vaccines for Covid-19. Using their God-given gifts of intelligence and dedication, they participated in the Reign of God by moving quickly, carefully, and effectively through a difficult, important, life-saving process.

The formula I have followed in this sermon can also be applied to your own Bible study or devotional reading. These are good questions to ask of any Scripture:

1. What trouble does the text expose? Is there an illness or a fear or a loss that yearns for resolution or restoration?
2. What grace does the text reveal? How does God move through the moment? In the Gospels, the grace of God is embodied in Jesus Christ who reaches out with healing and teaching and feeding and forgiveness. Even when grace comes in the surprising form of the fringe on Jesus’ prayer shawl, we trust that it carries the power to change and renew human lives.
3. What does this Scripture have to say about trouble in the world? How can it help us to be both clear-eyed about what is and hopeful about what can be? Does the text offer new insight about places of darkness and need; about people who cry out for God’s justice and God’s peace?
4. Where does this Scripture lead us as we seek to discern grace in the world? What decisions of discipleship does it call us to make? How can we bring the comfort and the transformation of God’s grace to places where the world is troubled? This week specifically, what grace can we offer in response to news of:
 - the devastating floods in Europe
 - the dangerous instability in Haiti
 - the protests and turmoil in Cuba

- new surges of Covid-19 infection throughout our nation and increased division between those who support vaccination efforts and those who oppose them
- there may be other stories touching your heart this day

I want to say that when we consider how we can participate in the work of bringing God's grace to the world, it's important to realize that none of us will or can respond to every area and instance of trouble. Our decisions of discipleship are always made by discerning what is ours to do, even as we trust that what is not given to us will be carried by others.

This world is a place of great trouble. But that is not the end of the story, for this is the world God loved enough to send the Only Son so that the world and all who live in it would not perish but be saved. There is grace in this world, grace we can see and touch and share through the One who comes to heal us, to save us, to love us eternally.

Amen.