

***Desperately Seeking Jesus***

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

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You probably need to be 35 or older to remember Clara Peller. In 1984 she was an 82-year-old actress with a raspy voice who performed in commercials for Wendy's. She was the one who would go up to a competitor's hamburger joint, look at the giant buns on their burgers, open up the burger, and cry out, "Where's the beef?!"

A couple of weeks ago, when I first took a look at the lectionary selections for today, I was struck by what is not included in the text from Mark. At first glance, after looking at the assigned text, I wanted to cry out, "Where's the beef?!"

The verses for this morning come just before and after two of the more notable events in Jesus' ministry. What we don't hear in this morning's verses are the stories of Jesus feeding the five thousand, and Jesus walking on water. What we do get are the bookends on either side of those two stories. But the bookends are important. The bookends themselves have a message to proclaim to us.

As we pick up the Mark text today, the disciples have returned from their mission trip, and they are eager to tell Jesus all about the amazing things they had done in Jesus' name. The problem is, they keep getting interrupted by everybody crowding around Jesus. Jesus tries to take his disciples to a quiet place where his disciples can rest and debrief, but the crowds are relentless in following them. Even after Jesus had fed them all and later joined his disciples in the boat, as soon as they land, on the other side of the lake, the crowds gather once again.

Jesus is being hounded by the people. They don't give him a moment's rest.

Most of us, if we were in the disciples' sandals, would have joined in their frustration at the relentless crowds. Probably well before the end of the day, I would have suggested that Jesus send them away. From the disciples' perspective, I look upon the crowds as an annoying nuisance.

But today I want to take a look at the crowds of people from another perspective. Because, as a casual observer of this story, what I see in the people pursuing Jesus is a sense of urgency, a sense of desperation, a sense of determination that you don't often find in people. The crowds of people won't be put off. They won't stop their pursuit of Jesus until they have received what they came to him for.

The people pressed in around Jesus. They had needs. They were sick. They were lost and wandering, needy and helpless. They were sinful and guilty. They were desperately in need, and somewhere deep within themselves they knew that their needs could only be met in Jesus.

And you know, even though I'm sure the disciples were put off by all the people, there's something I really admire when I see the people flocking around Jesus. There is in the people a desperate seeking, a deep hunger, an intense longing that I sometimes find myself wishing I had. I don't envy the sickness, the emptiness, the brokenness that brings them to Jesus, but I do admire the intensity of their desire.

I suspect that many of you understand what I'm talking about. We get into a routine. Our life and our faith are on cruise control. Your faith is there, but where is the sense of urgency? The love is there, but where is the passion?

What is it that fans the flames? What is it that creates a hunger, a longing for Christ? What will it take for us to capture the desperate seeking and deep longing for Jesus in our lives?

As I look at these bookend verses, I see three things that feed the desperation and determination in seeking Jesus.

For one thing, the people really were hungry. They were hungry for food, as is demonstrated by the story that is omitted from this morning's lessons. But Jesus also identified another hunger in these people: they were

hungry for something more. There was an emptiness that they needed filled. And so Jesus fed them. He fed them loaves and fishes; but he also fed them the Bread of Life.

I think that's something that's innate in all of us. Much has been written about the baby boom generation's abandonment of organized religion in the 60s and 70s. Sociologist Wade Clark Roof discovered that two thirds of them stopped active religious observance when they left home. But although they turned a skeptical eye toward traditional religion, the large majority of them continued in some form of spiritual seeking. Many Baby Boomers ended up embracing eastern religions, ecology, even the occult. Many have also returned to the Christian faith, because they recognize that the hunger that is motivating their seeking can't truly be satisfied apart from Jesus Christ. Through all their seeking, their emptiness remains until Christ fills it.

The hunger is there. The question is, where do you go to feed your hunger? Do you seek Jesus as the one to fill that emptiness inside?

People are hungry, and so they seek Jesus.

People also desperately seek Jesus because of an intense desire to for healing. At the end of the sixth chapter of Mark, the people bring the sick out to Jesus, in the hopes that even touching his garment will bring them healing. We assume that the people who needed healing were physically infirmed. And that's probably the case with most of them. But don't you think it's possible that some of those who came to Jesus for healing were sick, not in body, but in spirit and in soul?

When something's wrong, you want to get better. When something's wrong, you look for a way out.

Where do you go when something's wrong in your life? Do you take your own personal brokenness to Jesus, or do you just try to fix it by yourself?

People desperately seek Jesus because they are hungry.

And people desperately seek Jesus because they need healing in their lives.

The third reason that people desperately seek Jesus is because they are lost. Mark tells us that the people who were hounding Jesus were like sheep without a shepherd. What picture does that conjure up for you? For me it creates an image of people wandering without direction, scared of what they might find around the corner, people who feel all alone as the world passes them by without a second thought.

I still remember it vividly today. The summer before I entered the second grade, our family moved to Dallas. Our house was several blocks from the elementary school, and after a week or so of school, I decided that I would walk home. I don't remember if I had my mother's permission to do this, or if I simply decided not to wait for her to pick me up. In any case, I decided to walk home, so I set out down the street I thought would take me home. After several blocks, I discovered I wasn't going in the right direction. And I wasn't even sure that I knew how to get back to the school. There I was, on a busy street corner, the new kid in town, and I was lost, all by myself. I still remember the panic I felt. I still remember sitting on the corner and crying.

Being lost and helpless is a horrible feeling. You don't forget that kind of feeling. Being lost will quickly put urgency in your seeking.

Again, I don't envy the crowds who followed Jesus. They were hungry. They were sick, they were lost. But I do envy the determination of their faith. I do admire the desperate resolve with which they sought Jesus.

How about you? What is it that puts urgency into your seeking? Where do you turn when you're hungry for more, or when things aren't going right, or when you feel like you're lost?

Mark tells us one other thing in these bookend texts. He tells us how Jesus responds to the desperation and determination of those who seek him. Mark tells us that Jesus had compassion on them.

Jesus had compassion on them. He saw that they were like lost sheep, and he had compassion on them.

Compassion is a wonderful word. Sometimes we think it means we have pity for someone, or we feel sorry for them, but that's not what compassion means. When you look at its component parts, the word Compassion means, "to suffer with, to have passion with."

The key to compassion is the "withness" that the word implies.

When Jesus has compassion, he does not have compassion in a separated, detached manner from afar. His compassion is coming alongside of those who suffer. He takes our suffering into himself.

For Jesus, compassion means that he engages you and me in our suffering, in our times of need, in our pain and our sorrow. Jesus meets our desperation with his compassion.

In the gospels, when Jesus had compassion for people, he came to them and gave them what they needed. Jesus had compassion on the crowds, and he taught them, and he fed them. Jesus had compassion on a leper who had lived all his life as an outcast, and in his compassion Jesus brought healing to the leper. Jesus had compassion on blind men who desperately cried out to him, and he restored their vision. In a parable about the kingdom, a father saw his long-lost son returning from a life of debauchery, and the father had compassion on the son and restored the son into the family.

Such is the kind of compassion with which Jesus meets our seeking: it is a compassion that feeds the hungry, that heals the sick, that forgives the sinner, that helps the blind to see.

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In one of his shortest parables, Jesus said that “the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”

Now, for most of my life I have been taught that that parable teaches us that nothing else in life is more important than entering the kingdom, and that it’s worth giving up everything in order to receive it.

And that is certainly true.

But every once in a while I look at that parable in a different light. Instead of simply viewing that parable as a lesson that shows me the importance of entering the kingdom, I now see it also as a parable about how much we mean to Jesus. And what I recognize in the parable is that Jesus sees each of us as being that pearl of great value, and that each of us is of such great import to Jesus that he gave everything just to make us his own – even giving up his life.

It also tells me that there is one other reason to desperately seek Jesus, and that is because Jesus first has desperately sought us.

What is it that puts urgency into your seeking? Where do you turn when you're hungry for more, or when things aren't going right, or when you feel like you're lost?

What will it take to put some urgency into our seeking?