

Weekly Reflections on the Sunday Gospel

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SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Our Scripture passage comes from the Gospel of Mark 6:30–34. In this reading we hear of Jesus calling the apostles to rest with Him. The crowds follow, and eventually Jesus responds by teaching them and feeding them like a shepherd caring for His sheep. This simple scene in the Gospel of Mark offers some important insights for us as we carry out our Lord's ministry as well.

The word "apostle" means someone who is "sent out" and in Mark 6:7 we read about Jesus sending the Twelve on mission to proclaim the Kingdom of God in word and action. Now the Twelve (the "sent ones") return to Jesus to report on their efforts. Jesus responds by inviting them to rest in a deserted place. The biblical notion of rest is founded in the Book of Genesis where God "rested" on the seventh day establishing the experience of rest as a gift to humanity (see Gn 2:2–3). This gift of rest is not primarily to alleviate exhaustion but to foster a contemplative appreciation for having shared in God's creative and redemptive work. This spiritual rest is meant to foster and deepen our intimate relationship with the Lord so that our efforts of ministry are not just "working for God" but a "participation in God's work". There is a big difference between those two approaches to ministry. It is the experience of regular spiritual rest and appreciative contemplation with God that allows us to know the mind of Christ and to do God's will with eagerness, generosity, and freedom. Jesus wanted the twelve apostles to have this experience of spiritual rest so they could better understand how their efforts participated in God's divine will for the world. The passage then goes to tell us that the crowds kept coming in large numbers and so they sought to go away by themselves in a boat. The continuous needs of the crowds remind us that there is always more work to be done and that a disciple must balance the need for contemplative rest in Christ with the need for ministry to others. One dimension of discipleship is not possible without the other. If we only work tirelessly to serve the needs of others then we run the risk of becoming detached from the life-giving relationship with Christ that is the foundation of our identity as disciples. If we only seek to be withdrawn in contemplative rest with Christ then we can fail to accomplish the ministry of Jesus entrusted to us, which the world so desperately needs. It is important for disciples to balance these two important dimensions of their faith lives so they can be effective and responsive instruments of God.

What time do you set aside in your schedule for regular, contemplative, appreciative rest with God?

How are you tempted to cut short your spiritual rest in order to carry out the overwhelming duties and responsibilities of discipleship?

What opportunities exist for you to spend extended time with the Lord, and what holds you back from accepting those opportunities?

The crowd was perceived as an inconvenient burden by the apostles. We are told that they were not even able to eat because of the people who came to them in large numbers. The disciples responded by trying to evade the crowds so as to care for their own needs. Jesus perceives the

crowds in a different way, however. Rather than being a problem, Jesus sees the crowds as a blessed opportunity that allowed the Lord to carry out His ministry. These two differing perceptions challenge us to be careful in how we perceive and respond to circumstances as well. Sometimes it can be easy for disciples to feel burdened by the questions or needs of others. Sometimes another person's desire to explore faith can even become inconvenient and problematic for us because of the time and preparation it takes to respond. Jesus sees such moments as open possibilities for bringing the Gospel into people's lives. The Lord is showing us in this passage that we should be eager and thankful when we have the opportunity to affect and influence people with the gift of faith.

When have the demands of a successful ministry experience felt problematic or burdensome to you?

When have you experienced surprising success in a ministry that presented a ripe opportunity for you to bring the Gospel into people's lives, and what personal sacrifices did you have to make in order to accomplish that ministry?

Jesus understood that the presence of the crowds was a ripe moment that needed to be responded to lest it become a lost opportunity. What are ripe moments in the Church today that need urgent response and what are lost opportunities we are experiencing?

When have you experienced the attitude of the apostles—the perception that ministry opportunities are a problematic burden—and what has been the effect of that attitude? Why do you think Jesus chose to teach the crowds rather than try to retreat once more with the disciples?

We are told that Jesus had compassion on the crowds because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Motivated by compassion, our Lord began to teach them many things. The image of God as a shepherd for Israel is deeply rooted in the Old Testament and features prominently in the first reading for this Sunday's liturgy (Jer 23:1–6). Shepherds had four primary responsibilities: to gather the sheep, to guide the sheep, to protect the sheep, and to care for the sheep. Jesus presents Himself in this passage as the shepherd who fulfills all of these roles. The Lord gathered the crowds to Himself rather than sending them away and scattering them (see Mk 6:35). Jesus also teaches them in an action of loving direction and guidance for their lives (see Mk 6:34). The Lord cares for them by feeding them not only with His Word (teaching) but also with the Bread of the Eucharist (see Mk 6:37–44). Finally, the Lord protects them by confronting the efforts of those who would seek to dismiss them (see Mk 6:36–37) as well as through the ongoing ministry of healing and deliverance accomplished through the apostles.

How does Jesus continue to fulfill the responsibilities of being our shepherd today?

In what specific ways do you need the protective, collective, caring, and guiding ministry of Jesus in your life?

How can you make yourself open and receptive to Jesus as your shepherd?

What can prevent people from wanting to be a member of God's flock?

Lastly, it is interesting to note that the crowds followed Jesus for some time and over significant distances without being prepared for the journey. That is why they arrived at the end of the day with no planned provisions (see Mk 6:35–36). Obviously the crowds heard about Jesus and responded immediately to the possibility of meeting the Lord for themselves. It is rare that we

would respond with such immediate initiative and lack of planning. The action of the crowd is not a statement of their irresponsibility but of the readiness of their discipleship. They were willing to drop everything in order to seek the Lord and spend time with Him. We too can be urgently motivated to respond immediately to all sorts of situations and opportunities but when it comes to disciples, we can be hesitant and even procrastinate in our response.

What urgent opportunity motivates you to drop everything and respond immediately?

When do you find yourself responding so slowly to faith opportunities that the occasion passes before you can participate?

How does the power of evil use the temptation of procrastination to rob people of valuable encounters with God?

What can a faith community do to help people respond with urgency to faith opportunities?